"An energetic, free-flowing, high-spirited translation."
—Edward Hirsch, *New York Times Book Review*

SIR GAWAIN AND THE GREEN KNIGHT

A New Verse Translation by

SIMON ARMITAGE

VISIT...

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CONTENTS

COVER

TITLE PAGE

INTRODUCTION *by Simon Armitage*

A NOTE ON MIDDLE ENGLISH METER *by James Simpson*

SIR GAWAIN AND THE GREEN KNIGHT

ACKNOWLEDGMENTS

ABOUT THE *GAWAIN* POET

ABOUT THE TRANSLATOR

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PRAISE

INTRODUCTION

We know next to nothing about the author of the poem that has come to be called *Sir Gawain and the Green Knight*. It was probably written around 1400. In the early seventeenth century the manuscript was recorded as belonging to a Yorkshireman, Henry Saville of Bank. It was later acquired by Sir Robert Cotton, whose collection also included the Lindisfarne Gospels and the only existing manuscript of *Beowulf*. The poem then lay dormant for over two hundred years, not coming to light until Queen Victoria was on the throne, thus leapfrogging the attentions of some of our greatest writers and critics. The manuscript, a small, unprepossessing thing, would fit comfortably into an average-size hand, were anyone actually allowed to touch it. Now referred to as Cotton Nero A.x., it is considered not only a most brilliant example of Middle English poetry but one of the jewels in the crown of English Literature, and sits in the British Library under conditions of high security and controlled humidity.

To cast eyes on the manuscript, or even to shuffle the unbound pages of the Early English Text Society's facsimile edition, is to be intrigued by the handwriting; stern, stylish letters, like crusading chess pieces, fall into orderly ranks along faintly ruled lines. But the man whose calligraphy we ponder, a jobbing scribe, probably, was not the author. The person who has become known as the *Gawain* poet remains as shadowy as the pages themselves. Among many other reasons, it is partly this anonymity that has made the poem so attractive to latter-day translators. The lack of authorship seems to serve as an invitation, opening up a space within the poem for a new writer to occupy. Its comparatively recent rediscovery acts as a further draw; if Milton or Pope had put their stamp on it, or if Dr. Johnson had offered an opinion, or if Keats or Coleridge or Wordsworth had drawn it into their orbit, such an invitation might now appear less forthcoming.

The diction of the original tells us that its author was, broadly speaking, a northerner. Or we might say a midlander. The linguistic epicenter is thought to be located somewhere between north Staffordshire and south Lancashire. Some researchers claim to have identified Swythamley Grange as the Castle of Hautdesert, or the jagged peaks of The Roaches as those "rughe knokled knarres with

knorned stones," (2166). Lud's Church, a natural fissure in the rocks near the village of Flash, in Debyshire, has been proposed as the site of the Green Chapel. "Hit hade a hole on the ende and on ayther syde, / And overgrowen with gresse in glodes anywhere; / And al was holw inwith, nobot an olde cave / Or a crevisse of an olde cragge" (2180–2183). It may or may not be the place, but to stand in that mossy cleft that cannot have changed much over the centuries is to believe that the author had an actual landscape in mind when he conceived the poem, and lured his young protagonist into a northern region to legitimize his vocabulary and to make good use of his surrounding geography. A similar strategy has informed this translation; although my own part of England is separated from Lud's Church by the swollen uplands of The Peak District, coaxing Gawain and his poem back into the Pennines was always part of the plan.

Of course, to the trained medievalist the poem is perfectly readable in its original form; no translation necessary. And even for the nonspecialist, certain lines, such as, "Bot Arthure wolde not ete til al were served," (85), especially when placed within the context of the narrative, present little problem. Conversely, lines such as "Forthi, iwysse, bi yowre wylle, wende me bihoves," (1065) are incomprehensible to the general reader. But it is the lines that fall somewhere between those extremes—the majority of lines, in fact—which fascinate the most. They seem to make sense, though not quite. To the untrained eye, it is as if the poem is lying beneath a thin coat of ice, tantalizingly near yet frustratingly blurred. To a contemporary poet, one interested in narrative and form, the urge to blow a little warm breath across that layer of frosting eventually proved irresistible. And even more so to a northerner who not only recognizes plenty of the poem's dialect but who detects an echo of his own speech within the original. Words such as "bide" (wait), "nobut" (nothing but), "childer" (children), "layke" (play), "karp" (talk), "bout" (without), "brid" (bird), "sam" (gather up), and "barlay" (truce) are still in usage in these parts, though mainly (and sadly) among members of the older generation.

Not all poems are stories, but *Sir Gawain and the Green Knight* most certainly is. After briefly anchoring its historical credentials in the siege of Troy, the poem quickly delivers us into Arthurian Britain, at Christmastime, with the knights of the Round Table in good humor and full voice. But the festivities at Camelot are to be disrupted by the astonishing appearance of a green knight. Not just a knight wearing green clothes, but a weird being whose skin and hair is green, and whose horse is green as well. The gate-crasher lays down a seemingly absurd challenge, involving beheading and revenge. Alert to the opportunity, a young knight, Gawain, Arthur's nephew, rises from the

table. What follows is a test of his courage and a test of his heart, and during the ensuing episodes, which span an entire calendar year, Gawain must steel himself against fear and temptation. The poem is also a ghost story, a thriller, a romance, an adventure story, and a morality tale. For want of a better word, it is also a myth, and like all great myths of the past its meanings seem to have adapted and evolved, proving itself eerily relevant six hundred years later. As one example, certain aspects of Gawain's situation seem oddly redolent of a more contemporary predicament, namely our complex and delicate relationship with the natural world. The *Gawain* poet had never heard of climate change and was not a prophet anticipating the onset of global warming. But medieval society lived hand in hand with nature, and nature was as much an enemy as a friend. It is not just for decoration that the poem includes passages relating to the turning of the seasons, or detailed accounts of the landscape, or graphic descriptions of our dealings with the animal kingdom. The knight who throws down the challenge at Camelot is both ghostly and real. Supernatural, yes, but also flesh and blood. He is something in the likeness of ourselves, and he is not purple or orange or blue with yellow stripes. Gawain must negotiate a deal with a man who wears the colors of the leaves and the fields. He must strike an honest bargain with this manifestation of nature, and his future depends on it.

Over the years there have been dozens, possibly hundreds of translations of *Sir Gawain and the Green Knight*, ranging from important scholarly restorations, to freehanded poetic or prose versions, to exercises in form and technique by students of Middle English, many of them posted on the Internet. Some translators, for perfectly valid reasons and with great success, have chosen not to imitate its highly alliterative form. But to me, alliteration is the warp and weft of the poem, without which it is just so many fine threads. In some very elemental way, the story and the sense of the poem is directly located within its sound. The percussive patterning of the words serves to reinforce their meaning and to countersink them within the memory. So in trying to harmonize with the original rather than transcribe every last word of it, certain liberties have been taken. This is not an exercise in linguistic forensics or medieval history; the intention has always been to produce a living, inclusive, and readable piece of work in its own right.

Readers of this parallel text edition are offered the opportunity of allowing their eye to travel across the gutter of the book from an original line to its corresponding translation. Occasionally they will be presented with something like a mirror image, or at least a striking resemblance. The first line of the poem, for example, aside for the odd

bit of touching-up, is a fairly honest reproduction. Other lines, however, will be less recognizable in their altered state. There is plenty to argue with here, and for some commentators, this kind of approach will always be unacceptable. But this is a poem, not a crib or a glossary, and in imitating the alliterative style of *Sir Gawain and the Green Knight* it is inevitable that the translator will be led away from the words of the original and their direct contemporary equivalents. Take the much discussed issue of the *Gawain* poet's many words for "knight" or "man." Terms at his disposal included "freke," "hathel," "burne," "tulk," "segge," "schalk," and "gome." In a literal translation, with the use of a dictionary, each of those obsolete words could be replaced by a modern word of the same meaning, without too much agonizing over its acoustic properties or pronunciation. But in an alliterative translation those agonies must be experienced; in trawling for appropriate substitute words the net must be cast wider. In the "bob and wheel" sections where meter and rhyme also enter the equation, further deviations are inevitable. Lines 81–82 read: "The comlokest to discrye / Ther glent with yyen gray" (Broadly speaking, the fairest to behold / looked on with gray eyes). A literal translation gives us the cold facts of Guinevere's beauty, yet the unspoken poetic intelligence suggests that her eyes are precious stones, more priceless than the "best gemmes" mentioned in the previous line. Of all the jewels that surround her, it is her own eyes that glint and gleam the most. My own poetic response has been to introduce "quartz" and "queen," despite neither of those words being present in the original lines. I hope that readers will be able to see this as a kind of controlled and necessary flirtation, rather than carefree unfaithfulness or mindless infidelity.

Aside from the technical requirements of the poem, there are other reasons for departing from the literal, and those reasons are to do with the very nature of poetry itself. Poetry is not just meaning and information. Poetry is about manner as much as it is about matter—the manner in which words behave under certain conditions and in particular surroundings. Such behaviors give poems their unique character. Over time these behaviors change, or come to signify different things, and their latter-day counterparts are more likely to be found in the imagination than in the dictionary or the encyclopedia. For this reason the poet who works as a translator will rarely be content with a tit-for-tat exchange of one language into another, no matter how scrupulous the transfer. Here is line 1137:

By that any daylight lemed upon erthe

"By the time that some daylight shone upon earth" would be a

reasonable literal translation. At first sight this not a particularly appealing line. To begin with, it is one of the moments in the poem when the alliteration falters. Also, for a description of the life-bringing dawn, and as a curtain-raiser to one of the greatest hunting scenes in all literature, it seems pretty tame. But there is power here, and much of that power is invested in that single word "lemed," from an Old Norse word, "ljóma," meaning "to shine." It is not a word used in English these days, which is a pity, because as a verb it has much to recommend it. The mouth opens to announce this word, and the tongue pushes forward, launching that first "l." Then something is projected outward, from the breathed "e" to the agreeable, humming "m," all the way through to that final "d," like a soft landing, the laying down of light "upon" the ground. If it is onomatopoeic it is also metaphorical, magical even, a one word image. It signals to me that poetry is at work here, and it seems to demand a poetic response. My own, "So as morning was lifting its lamp to the land" introduces words and concepts that are foreign to the original line, but not, I hope, out of keeping with its ambitions or intentions. Neither does it derail the story line or contradict the basic facts. Ornamentation has happened here, but hopefully the structural integrity has not been compromised.

Returning to the subject of alliteration, it should be mentioned that within each line it is the *stressed* syllables that count. A translated line like, "and retrieves the intestines in time-honored style," (1612) might appear not to alliterate at first glance. But read it out loud, and the repetition of that "t" sound—the tut-tutting, the spit of revulsion, the squirming of the warm, wet tongue as it makes contact with the roof of the mouth—seems to suggest a physical relationship with the action being described. If the technique is effective, as well as understanding what we are being told we take a step closer to actually experiencing it. It is an attempt to combine meaning with feeling. This is a translation not only for the eye, but for the ear and the voice as well. Further to that, it is worth noting that the pronunciation of our hero's very name is not universally agreed upon. To many he is *Ga*wain. The original author clearly alliterated on the "G," suggesting he also stressed the first syllable of the word. But there are other moments in the text, such as the perfectly iambic quatrain at 1948, where the rhythm suggests the opposite, as in Ga*wain,* which is the way I have always referred to him. For the convenience of having my cake and eating it, sometimes I have allowed the tough-looking "G" to perform a visual alliteration, and sometimes I have required the "w" to act as the load bearer.

Sir Gawain and the Green Knight is a poem that succeeds through a

series of vivid contrasts: standard English contrasting with colloquial speech; the devotion and virtue of the young knight contrasting with the growling threats of his green foe; exchanges of courtly love contrasting with none-too-subtle sexual innuendo; exquisite robes and priceless crowns contrasting with spurting blood and the steaming organs of butchered deer; polite, indoor society contrasting with the untamed, unpredictable outdoors . . . and so on. Those contrasts stretch the imaginative universe of the poem and make it three dimensional. Without the space they open up, there would be no poem to speak of. The same contrasts can be observed in the form of the poem as well as its tone, with elements of order and disorder at work throughout, often operating simultaneously. On the side of order we have the carefully crafted form, the very particular number of verses, and the rhyme and rhythm of the bob and wheel sections. On the side of disorder we have the unequal line lengths, the variable verse lengths, and the wildly fluctuating pace of the story. Even the alliteration, a constant and insistent heartbeat for the most part, misses a beat every now and again and flatlines completely on at least one occasion. So within the strictures and confines of this very formal piece we detect a human presence, the *Gawain* poet, a disciplined craftsman who also liked to run risks and take liberties. He would appear to have set himself a series of rules, then consciously and conspicuously gone about bending them. As his translator, I hope to have been guided by his example.

—Simon Armitage

A NOTE ON MIDDLE ENGLISH METER

Simon Armitage's introduction to his splendid translation of *Sir Gawain and the Green Knight* provides all the basic information a reader might need to appreciate this work. For those readers who wish to hear, and to read, the original text, a few words on the poem's meter might be useful.

Metrical practice is determined by the deeper music of a language. In Germanic languages, the tonic, or accented syllable, is usually the first syllable of a word. In romance languages, by contrast, the tonic syllable falls toward, or at the end, of words. Germanic poets therefore highlight the beginning of words with alliteration, whereas romance poets (e.g., French or Italian) highlight the end of words with rhyme.

Alliteration (from Latin *litera*, alphabetic letter) consists of the repetition of an initial consonant sound or consonant cluster in consecutive or closely positioned words. Anglo-Saxon is the earlier, purely Germanic form of English used in England from the time of the Germanic invasions in the fifth century until the Norman Conquest in 1066. All poetry in Anglo-Saxon is alliterative. Only after the Norman Conquest, and the impact of French, did poets writing in English begin to use rhyme as a fundamental part of their metrical practice. Anglo-Saxon poetry and metrical practice were for the most part displaced by models of continental poetry deploying rhyme, even if there are some very brilliant, post-Conquest exceptions (notably the alliterative Lawman's *Brut,* c. 1190). From the mid-fourteenth century, however, for reasons not fully understood, an extraordinary range of alliterative poems appear. It seems likely that this body of work constitutes a revival of an older metrical tradition. Poems written or somehow located in the west of England (naturally the most conservative linguistically, given the pressure for change from the east) from the middle of the fourteenth century use alliterative meter in a wide range of poetic genres. To this group of texts, and in particular to a more refined, technically disciplined metrical practice characteristic of North-Western texts, the remarkable *Sir Gawain and the Green Knight* belongs. For all his commitment to alliterative verse of great technical virtuosity, however, the *Gawain*-poet also signals that he's skilful in rhyme, too, since each stanza ends with five short rhyming lines.

The poem is written in stanzas. The number of lines per stanza

varies. The line is longer, and does not contain a fixed number or pattern of stresses like the classical alliterative meter of Anglo-Saxon poetry. The standard metrical pattern is *a a/a x*, where *a* signifies an alliterating, stressed syllable; */* signifies a caesura; and *x* signifies a nonalliterating stressed syllable. The poet frequently enriches this pattern. Each stanza closes, as mentioned above, with five short lines, rhyming *a b a b a*. The first of these rhyming lines contains just one stress, and is called the "bob"; the four three stress lines that follow are called the "wheel."

—*James Simpson*

SIR GAWAIN AND THE GREEN KNIGHT

FITT I

Once the siege and assault of Troy had ceased,
with the city a smoke-heap of cinders and ash,
the traitor who contrived such betrayal there
was tried for his treachery, the truest on earth;
so Aeneas, it was, with his noble warriors
went conquering abroad, laying claim to the crowns
of the wealthiest kingdoms in the western world.
Mighty Romulus quickly careered towards Rome
and conceived a city in magnificent style
which from then until now has been known by his name.
Ticius constructed townships in Tuscany
and Langobard did likewise building homes in Lombardy.
And further afield, over the Sea of France,
on Britain's broad hilltops, Felix Brutus made
his stand.
And wonder, dread and war
have lingered in that land
where loss and love in turn
have held the upper hand.

After Britain was built by this founding father
a bold race bred there, battle-happy men
causing trouble and torment in turbulent times,
and through history more strangeness has happened here
than anywhere else I know of on Earth.
But most regal of rulers in the royal line
was Arthur, who I heard is honored above all,
and the inspiring story I intend to spin
has moved the hearts and minds of many—
an awesome episode in the legends of Arthur.
So listen a little while to my tale if you will
and I'll tell it as it's told in the town where it trips from
the tongue;
and as it has been inked

in stories bold and strong,
through letters which, once linked,
have lasted loud and long.

It was Christmas at Camelot—King Arthur's court,
where the great and the good of the land had gathered,
all the righteous lords of the ranks of the Round Table
quite properly carousing and reveling in pleasure.
Time after time, in tournaments of joust,
they had lunged at each other with leveled lances
then returned to the castle to carry on their caroling,
for the feasting lasted a full fortnight and one day,
with more food and drink than a fellow could dream of.
The hubbub of their humor was heavenly to hear:
pleasant dialogue by day and dancing after dusk,
so the house and its hall were lit with happiness
and lords and ladies were luminous with joy.
Such a coming together of the gracious and the glad:
the most chivalrous and courteous knights known to Christendom;
the most wonderful women to have walked in this world;
the handsomest king to be crowned at court.
Fine folk with their futures before them, there in
that hall.
Their highly honored king
was happiest of all:
no nobler knights had come
within a castle's wall.

With New Year so young it still yawned and stretched
helpings were doubled on the dais that day.
And as king and company were coming to the hall
the choir in the chapel fell suddenly quiet,
then a chorus erupted from the courtiers and clerks:
"Noel," they cheered, then "Noel, Noel,"
"New Year Gifts!" the knights cried next
as they pressed forwards to offer their presents,
teasing with frivolous favors and forfeits,
till those ladies who lost couldn't help but laugh,
and the undefeated were far from forlorn.
Their merrymaking rolled on in this manner until mealtime,
when, washed and worthy, they went to the table,
and were seated in order of honor, as was apt,
with Guinevere in their gathering, gloriously framed
at her place on the platform, pricelessly curtained

by silk to each side, and canopied across
with French weave and fine tapestry from the far east
studded with stones and stunning gems.
Pearls beyond pocket. Pearls beyond purchase
or price.
But not one stone outshone
the quartz of the queen's eyes;
with hand on heart, no one
could argue otherwise.

But Arthur would not eat until all were served.
He brimmed with ebullience, being almost boyish
in his love of life, and what he liked the least
was to sit still watching the seasons slip by.
His blood was busy and he buzzed with thoughts,
and the matter which played on his mind at that moment
was his pledge to take no portion from his plate
on such a special day until a story was told:
some far-fetched yarn or outrageous fable,
the tallest of tales, yet one ringing with truth,
like the action-packed epics of men-at-arms.
Or till some chancer had challenged his chosen knight,
dared him, with a lance, to lay life on the line,
to stare death face-to-face and accept defeat
should fortune or fate smile more favorably on his foe.
Within Camelot's castle this was the custom,
and at feasts and festivals when the fellowship
would meet.
With features proud and fine
he stood there tall and straight,
a king at Christmastime
amid great merriment.

And still he stands there just being himself,
chatting away charmingly, exchanging views.
Good Sir Gawain is seated by Guinevere,
and at Arthur's other side sits Agravain the Hard Hand,
both nephews of the king and notable knights.
At the head sat Bishop Baldwin as Arthur's guest of honor,
with Ywain, son of Urien, to eat beside him.
And as soon as the nobles had sampled the spread
the stalwarts on the benches to both sides were served.
The first course comes in to the fanfare and clamor
of blasting trumpets hung with trembling banners,

then pounding double-drums and dinning pipes,
weird sounds and wails of such warbled wildness
that to hear and feel them made the heart float free.120
Flavorsome delicacies of flesh were fetched in
and the freshest of foods, so many in fact
there was scarcely space to present the stews
or to set the soups in the silver bowls on
the cloth.
Each guest received his share
of bread or meat or broth;
a dozen plates per pair—
plus beer or wine, or both!

Now, on the subject of supper I'll say no more130
as it's obvious to everyone that no one went without.
Because another sound, a new sound, suddenly drew near,
which might signal the king to sample his supper,
for barely had the horns finished blowing their breath
and with starters just spooned to the seated guests,
a fearful form appeared, framed in the door:
a mountain of a man, immeasurably high,
a hulk of a human from head to hips,
so long and thick in his loins and his limbs
I should genuinely judge him to be a half giant,140
or a most massive man, the mightiest of mortals.
But handsome, too, like any horseman worth his horse,
for despite the bulk and brawn of his body
his stomach and waist were slender and sleek.
In fact in all features he was finely formed
it seemed.
Amazement seized their minds,
no soul had ever seen
a knight of such a kind—
entirely emerald green.150

And his gear and garments were green as well:
a tight fitting tunic, tailored to his torso,
and a cloak to cover him, the cloth fully lined
with smoothly shorn fur clearly showing, and faced
with all-white ermine, as was the hood,
worn shawled on his shoulders, shucked from his head.
On his lower limbs his leggings were also green,
wrapped closely round his calves, and his sparkling spurs
were green-gold, strapped with stripy silk,

and were set on his stockings, for this stranger was shoeless.160
In all vestments he revealed himself veritably verdant!
From his belt hooks and buckle to the baubles and gems
arrayed so richly around his costume
and adorning the saddle, stitched onto silk.
All the details of his dress are difficult to describe,
embroidered as it was with butterflies and birds,
green beads emblazoned on a background of gold.
All the horse's tack—harness strap, hind strap,
the eye of the bit, each alloy and enamel
and the stirrups he stood in were similarly tinted,170
and the same with the cantle and the skirts of the saddle,
all glimmering and glinting with the greenest jewels.
And the horse: every hair was green, from hoof
to mane.
A steed of pure green stock.
Each snort and shudder strained
the hand-stitched bridle, but
his rider had him reined.

The fellow in green was in fine fettle.
The hair of his head was as green as his horse,180
fine flowing locks which fanned across his back,
plus a bushy green beard growing down to his breast,
and his face hair along with the hair of his head
was lopped in a line at elbow length
so half his arms were gowned in green growth,
crimped at the collar, like a king's cape.
The mane of his mount was groomed to match,
combed and knotted into curlicues
then tinseled with gold, tied and twisted
green over gold, green over gold. . . .190
The fetlocks were finished in the same fashion
with bright green ribbon braided with beads,
as was the tail—to its tippety-tip!
And a long, tied thong lacing it tight
was strung with gold bells which resounded and shone.
No waking man had witnessed such a warrior
or weird warhorse—otherworldly, yet flesh
and bone.
A look of lightning flashed
from somewhere in his soul.200
The force of that man's fist
would be a thunderbolt.

Yet he wore no helmet and no hauberk either,
no armored apparel or plate was apparent,
and he swung no sword nor sported any shield,
but held in one hand a sprig of holly—
of all the evergreens the greenest ever—
and in the other hand held the mother of all axes,
a cruel piece of kit I kid you not:
the head was an ell in length at least
and forged in green steel with a gilt finish;
the skull-busting blade was so stropped and buffed
it could shear a man's scalp and shave him to boot.
The handle which fitted that fiend's great fist
was inlaid with iron, end to end,
with green pigment picking out impressive designs.
From stock to neck, where it stopped with a knot,
a lace was looped the length of the haft,
trimmed with tassels and tails of string
fastened firmly in place by forest-green buttons.
And he kicks on, canters through that crowded hall
towards the top table, not the least bit timid,
cocksure of himself, sitting high in the saddle.
"And who," he bellows, without breaking breath,
"is governor of this gaggle? I'll be glad to know.
It's with him and him alone that I'll have
my say."
The green man steered his gaze
deep into every eye,
explored each person's face
to probe for a reply.

The guests looked on. They gaped and they gawked
and were mute with amazement: what did it mean
that human and horse could develop this hue,
should grow to be grass-green or greener still,
like green enamel emboldened by bright gold?
Some stood and stared then stepped a little closer,
drawn near to the knight to know his next move;
they'd seen some sights, but this was something special,
a miracle or magic, or so they imagined.
Yet several of the lords were like statues in their seats,
left speechless and rigid, not risking a response.
The hall fell hushed, as if all who were present
had slipped into sleep or some trancelike state.

No doubt
not all were stunned and stilled
by dread, but duty bound
to hold their tongues until
their sovereign could respond.

Then the king acknowledged this curious occurrence,
cordially addressed him, keeping his cool.
“A warm welcome, sir, this winter’s night.
My name is Arthur, I am head of this house.
Won’t you slide from that saddle and stay awhile,
and the business which brings you we shall learn of later.”
“No,” said the knight, “it’s not in my nature
to idle or allack about this evening.
But because your acclaim is so loudly chorused,
and your castle and brotherhood are called the best,
the strongest men to ever mount the saddle,
the worthiest knights ever known to the world,
both in competition and true combat,
and since courtesy, so it’s said, is championed here,
I’m intrigued, and attracted to your door at this time.
Be assured by this hollin stem here in my hand
that I mean no menace. So expect no malice,
for if I’d slogged here tonight to slay and slaughter
my helmet and hauberk wouldn’t be at home
and my sword and spear would be here at my side,
and more weapons of war, as I’m sure you’re aware;
I’m clothed for peace, not kitted out for conflict.
But if you’re half as honorable as I’ve heard folk say
you’ll gracefully grant me this game which I ask for
by right.”
Then Arthur answered, “Knight
most courteous, you claim
a fair, unarmored fight.
We’ll see you have the same.”

“I’m spoiling for no scrap, I swear. Besides,
the bodies on these benches are just bum-fluffed bairns.
If I’d ridden to your castle rigged out for a ruck
these lightweight adolescents wouldn’t last a minute.
But it’s Yuletide—a time of youthfulness, yes?
So at Christmas in this court I lay down a challenge:
if a person here present, within these premises,
is big or bold or red blooded enough

to strike me one stroke and be struck in return,
I shall give him as a gift this gigantic cleaver
and the axe shall be his to handle how he likes.
I'll kneel, bare my neck and take the first knock.290
So who has the gall? The gumption? The guts?
Who'll spring from his seat and snatch this weapon?
I offer the axe—who'll have it as his own?
I'll afford one free hit from which I won't flinch,
and promise that twelve months will pass in peace,
then claim
the duty I deserve
in one year and one day.
Does no one have the nerve
to wager in this way?"300

Flustered at first, now totally foxed
were the household and the lords, both the highborn and the low.
Still stirruped, the knight swiveled round in his saddle
looking left and right, his red eyes rolling
beneath the bristles of his bushy green brows,
his beard swishing from side to side.
When the court kept its counsel he cleared his throat
and stiffened his spine. Then he spoke his mind:
"So here is the House of Arthur," he scoffed,
"whose virtues reverberate across vast realms.310
Where's the fortitude and fearlessness you're so famous for?
And the breathtaking bravery and the big-mouth bragging?
The towering reputation of the Round Table,
skittled and scuppered by a stranger—what a scandal!
You flap and you flinch and I've not raised a finger!"
Then he laughed so loud that their leader saw red.
Blood flowed to his fine-featured face and he raged
inside.
His men were also hurt—
those words had pricked their pride.320
But born so brave at heart
the king stepped up one stride.

"Your request," he countered, "is quite insane,
and folly finds the man who flirts with the fool.
No warrior worth his salt would be worried by your words,
so in heaven's good name hand over the axe
and I'll happily fulfil the favor you ask."
He strides to him swiftly and seizes his arm;

the man-mountain dismounts in one mighty leap.
Then Arthur grips the axe, grabs it by its haft
and takes it above him, intending to attack.
Yet the stranger before him stands up straight,
highest in the house by at least a head.
Quite simply he stands there stroking his beard,
fiddling with his coat, his face without fear,
about to be bludgeoned, but no more bothered
than a guest at the table being given a goblet
of wine.
By Guinevere, Gawain
now to his king inclines
and says, “I stake my claim.
This moment must be mine.”

“Should you call me, courteous lord,” said Gawain to his king,
“to rise from my seat and stand at your side,
politely take leave of my place at the table
and quit without causing offence to my queen,
then I shall come to your counsel before this great court.
For I find it unfitting, as my fellow knights would,
when a deed of such daring is dangled before us
that you take on this trial—tempted as you are—
when brave, bold men are seated on these benches,
men never matched in the mettle of their minds,
never beaten or bettered in the field of battle.
I am weakest of your warriors and feeblest of wit;
loss of my life would be grieved the least.
Were I not your nephew my life would mean nothing;
to be born of your blood is my body’s only claim.
Such a foolish affair is unfitting for a king,
so, being first to come forward, it should fall to me.
And if my proposal is improper, let no other person
stand blame.”
The knighthood then unites
and each knight says the same:
their king can stand aside
and give Gawain the game.

So the sovereign instructed his knight to stand.
Getting to his feet he moved graciously forward
and knelt before Arthur, taking hold of the axe.
Letting go of it, Arthur then held up his hand
to give young Gawain the blessing of God

and hope he finds firmness in heart and fist.
“Take care, young cousin, to catch him cleanly,
use full-blooded force then you needn’t fear
the blow which he threatens to trade in return.”
Gawain, with the weapon, walked towards the warrior,
and they stood face-to-face, not one man afraid.
Then the green knight spoke, growled at Gawain:
“Before we compete, repeat what we’ve promised.
And start by saying your name to me, sir,
and tell me the truth so I can take it on trust.”
“In good faith, it’s Gawain,” said the God-fearing knight,
“I heave this axe, and whatever happens after,
in twelvemonth’s time I’ll be struck in return
with any weapon you wish, and by you and you
alone.”
The other answers, says
“Well, by my living bones,
I welcome you Gawain
to bring the blade-head home.”

“Gawain,” said the green knight, “by God, I’m glad
the favor I’ve called for will fall from your fist.
You’ve perfectly repeated the promise we’ve made
and the terms of the contest are crystal clear.
Except for one thing: you must solemnly swear
that you’ll seek me yourself; that you’ll search me out
to the ends of the earth to earn the same blow
as you’ll dole out today in this decorous hall.”
“But where will you be? Where’s your abode?
You’re a man of mystery, as God is my maker.
Which court do you come from and what are you called?
There is knowledge I need, including your name,
then by wit I’ll work out the way to your door
and keep to our contract, so cross my heart.”
“But enough at New Year. It needs nothing more,”
said the war man in green to worthy Gawain.
“I could tell you the truth once you’ve taken the blow;
if you smite me smartly I could spell out the facts
of my house and home and my name, if it helps,
then you’ll pay me a visit and vouch for our pact.
Or if I keep quiet you might cope much better,
loafing and lounging here, looking no further. But
you stall!
Now grasp that gruesome axe

and show your striking style."
He answered, "Since you ask,"
and touched the tempered steel.

In the standing position he prepared to be struck,
bent forward, revealing a flash of green flesh
as he heaped his hair to the crown of his head,
the nape of his neck now naked and ready.
Gawain grips the axe and heaves it heavenwards,
plants his left foot firmly on the floor in front,
then swings it swiftly towards the bare skin.
The cleanness of the strike cleaved the spinal cord
and parted the fat and the flesh so far
that the bright steel blade took a bite from the floor.
The handsome head tumbles onto the earth
and the king's men kick it as it clatters past.
Blood gutters brightly against his green gown,
yet the man doesn't shudder or stagger or sink
but trudges towards them on those tree-trunk legs
and rummages around, reaches at their feet
and cops hold of his head and hoists it high,
and strides to his steed, snatches the bridle,
steps into the stirrup and swings into the saddle
still gripping his head by a handful of hair.
Then he settles himself in his seat with the ease
of a man unmarked, never mind being minus
his head!
And when he wheeled about
his bloody neck still bled.
His point was proved. The court
was deadened now with dread.

For that scalp and skull now swung from his fist;
towards the top table he turned the face
and it opened its eyelids, stared straight ahead
and spoke this speech, which you'll hear for yourselves:
"Sir Gawain, be wise enough to keep your word
and faithfully follow me until I'm found
as you vowed in this hall within hearing of these horsemen.
You're charged with getting to the Green Chapel,
to reap what you've sown. You'll rightfully receive
the justice you are due just as January dawns.
Men know my name as the Green Chapel knight
and even a fool couldn't fail to find me.

So come, or be called a coward forever."
With a tug of the reins he twisted around
and, head still in hand, galloped out of the hall,
so the hooves brought fire from the flame in the flint.
Which kingdom he came from they hadn't a clue,
no more than they knew where he made for next.
And then?
Well, with the green man gone
they laughed and grinned again.
And yet such goings-on
were magic to those men.

And although King Arthur was awestruck at heart
no sign of it showed. Instead he spoke
to his queen of queens with courteous words:
"Dear lady, don't be daunted by this deed today,
it's in keeping that such strangeness should occur at Christmas
between sessions of banter and seasonal song,
amid the lively pastimes of ladies and lords.
And at least I'm allowed to eat at last,
having witnessed such wonder, wouldn't you say?"
Then he glanced at Gawain and was graceful with his words:
"Now hang up your axe—one hack is enough."
So it dangled from the drape behind the dais
so that men who saw it would be mesmerised and amazed,
and give voice, on its evidence, to that stunning event.
Then the two of them turned and walked to the table,
the monarch and his man, and were met with food—
double dishes apiece, rare delicacies,
all manner of meals—and the music of minstrels.
And they danced and sang till the sun went down
that day.
But mind your mood, Gawain,
keep blacker thoughts at bay,
or loose this lethal game
you've promised you will play.

FITT II

This happening was a gift—just as Arthur had asked for
and had yearned to hear of while the year was young.
And if guests had no subject as they strolled to their seats,
now they chattered of Gawain's chances in this challenge.
And Gawain had been glad to begin the game,
but don't be so shocked should the plot turn pear-shaped:
for men might be merry when addled with mead
but each year, short lived, is unlike the last
and rarely resolves in the style it arrived.
So the festival finishes and a new year follows
in eternal sequence, season by season.
After lavish Christmas come the lean days of Lent
when the flesh is tested with fish and simple food.
Then the world's weather wages war on winter:
cold shrinks earthwards and the clouds climb;
sun-warmed, shimmering rain comes showering
onto meadows and fields where flowers unfurl;
woods and grounds wear a wardrobe of green;
birds burble with life and build busily
as summer spreads, settling on slopes as
it should.
Now every hedgerow brims
with blossom and with bud,
and lively songbirds sing
from lovely, leafy woods.

So summer comes in season with its subtle airs,
when the west wind sighs among shoots and seeds,
and those plants which flower and flourish are a pleasure
as their leaves let drip their drink of dew
and they sparkle and glitter when glanced by sunlight.
Then autumn arrives to harden the harvest
and with it comes a warning to ripen before winter.
The drying airs arrive, driving up dust
from the face of the earth to the heights of heaven,
and wild sky wrestles the sun with its winds,
and the leaves of the lime lay littered on the ground,
and grass that was green turns withered and gray.
Then all which had risen over-ripens and rots

and yesterday on yesterday the year dies away,
and winter returns, as is the way of the world
through time.
At Michaelmas the moon
stands like that season's sign,
a warning to Gawain
to rouse himself and ride.

Yet by All Saints' Day he was still at Arthur's side,
and they feasted in the name of their noble knight
with the revels and riches of the Round Table.
The lords of that hall and their loving ladies
were sad and concerned for the sake of their knight,
but nevertheless they made light of his load.
Those joyless at his plight made jokes and rejoiced.
Then sorrowfully, after supper, he spoke with his uncle,
and openly talked of the trip he must take:
"Now, lord of my life, I must ask for your leave.
You were witness to my wager. I have no wish
to retell you the terms—they're nothing but a trifle.
I must set out tomorrow to receive that stroke
from the knight in green, and let God be my guide."
Then the cream of Camelot crowded around:
Ywain and Eric and others of that ilk,
Sir Dodinal the Dreaded, the Duke of Clarence,
Lancelot, Lionel, Lucan the Good,
and Sir Bors and Sir Bedevere—both big names,
and powerful men such as Mador de la Port.
This courtly committee approaches the king
to offer up heartfelt advice to our hero.
And sounds of sadness and sorrow were heard
that one as worthy and well liked as Gawain
should suffer that strike but offer no stroke in
reply.
Yet keeping calm the knight
just quipped, "Why should I shy
away. If fate is kind
or cruel, man still must try."

He remained all that day and in the morning he dressed,
asked early for his arms and all were produced.
First a rug of rare cloth was unrolled on the floor,
heaped with gear which glimmered and gleamed,
and onto it he stepped to receive his armored suit.

He tries on his tunic of extravagant silk,
then the neatly cut cloak, closed at the neck,
its lining finished with a layer of white fur.
Then they settled his feet into steel shoes
and clad his calves, clamped them with greaves,
then hinged and highly polished plates
were knotted with gold thread to the knight's knees.
Then leg guards were fitted, lagging the flesh,
attached with thongs to his thick-set thighs.
Then comes the suit of shimmering steel rings
encasing his body and his costly clothes:
well burnished braces to both of his arms,
good elbow guards and glinting metal gloves,
all the trimmings and trappings of a knight tricked out
to ride:
a metal suit that shone;
gold spurs which gleam with pride;
a keen sword swinging from
the silk belt to his side.

Fastened in his armor he seemed fabulous, famous,
every link looking golden to the very last loop.
Yet for all that metal he still made it to mass,
honored the Almighty before the high altar.
After which he comes to the king and his consorts
and asks to take leave of the ladies and lords;
they escort and kiss him and commended him to Christ.
Now Gringolet is rigged out and ready to ride
with a saddle which flickered with fine gold fringes
and was set with new studs for the special occasion.
The bridle was bound with stripes of bright gold,
the apparel of the panels was matched in appearance
to the color of the saddlebows and cropper and cover,
and nails of red gold were arrayed all around,
shining splendidly like splintered sunlight.
Then he holds up his helmet and kisses it without haste;
it was strongly stapled and its lining was stuffed,
and sat high on his head, fastened behind
with a colorful cloth to cover his neck
embroidered and bejeweled with brilliant gems
on the broad silk border, and with birds on the seams
such as painted parrots perched among periwinkles
and turtle doves and true lover's knots, tightly entwined
as if women had worked at it seven winters

at least.
The diamond diadem
was greater still. It gleamed
with flawless, flashing gems
both clear and smoked, it seemed.

Then they showed him the shining scarlet shield
with its pentangle painted in pure gold.620
He seized it by its strap and slung it round his neck;
he looked well in what he wore, and was worthy of it.
And why the pentangle was appropriate to that prince
I intend to say, though it will stall our story.
It is a symbol that Solomon once set in place
and is taken to this day as a token of fidelity,
for the form of the figure is a five-pointed star
and each line overlaps and links with the last
so is ever eternal, and when spoken of in England
is known by the name of the endless knot.630
So it suits this soldier in his spotless armor,
fully faithful in five ways five times over.
For Gawain was as good as the purest gold—
devoid of vices but virtuous, loyal
and kind,
so bore that badge on both
his shawl and shield alike.
A prince who talked the truth.
A notable. A knight.

First he was deemed flawless in his five senses;640
and secondly his five fingers were never at fault;
and thirdly his faith was founded in the five wounds
Christ received on the cross, as the creed recalls.
And fourthly, if that soldier struggled in skirmish
one thought pulled him through above all other things:
the fortitude he found in the five joys
which Mary had conceived in her son, our Savior.
For precisely that reason the princely rider
had the shape of her image inside his shield,
so by catching her eye his courage would not crack.650
The fifth set of five which I heard the knight followed
included friendship and fraternity with fellow men,
purity and politeness that impressed at all times,
and pity, which surpassed all pointedness. Five things
which meant more to Gawain than to most other men.

So these five sets of five were fixed in this knight,
each linked to the last through the endless line,
a five-pointed form which never failed,
never stronger to one side or slack at the other,
but unbroken in its being from beginning to end
however its trail is tracked and traced.
So the star on the spangling shield he sported
shone royally, in gold, on a ruby red background,
the pure pentangle as people have called it
for years.
Then, lance in hand, held high,
and got up in his gear
he bids them all good-bye
one final time, he fears.

Spiked with the spurs the steed sped away
with such force that the fire-stones sparked underfoot.
All sighed at the sight, and with sinking hearts
they whispered their worries to one another,
concerned for their comrade. “A pity, by Christ,
if a lord so noble should lose his life.
To find his equal on earth would be far from easy.
Cleverer to have acted with caution and care,
deemed him a duke—a title he was due—
a leader of men, lord of many lands;
better that than being battered into oblivion,
beheaded by an ogre through headstrong pride.
How unknown for a king to take counsel of a knight
in the grip of an engrossing Christmas game.”
Warm tears welled up in their weepy eyes
as gallant Sir Gawain galloped from court
that day.
He sped from home and hearth
and went his winding way
on steep and snaking paths,
just as the story says.

Now through England’s realm he rides and rides,
Sir Gawain, God’s servant, on his grim quest,
passing long dark nights unloved and alone,
foraging to feed, finding little to call food,
with no friend but his horse through forests and hills
and only our Lord in heaven to hear him.
He wanders near to the north of Wales

with the Isles of Anglesey off to the left.
He keeps to the coast, fording each course,
crossing at Holy Head and coming ashore
in the wilds of the Wirral, whose wayward people
both God and good men have quite given up on.
And he constantly enquires of those he encounters
if they know, or not, in this neck of the woods,
of a great green man or a Green Chapel.
No, they say, never. Never in their lives.
They know of neither a chap nor a chapel
so strange.
He trails through bleak terrain.
His mood and manner change
at every twist and turn
towards that chosen church.

In a strange region he scales steep slopes;
far from his friends he cuts a lonely figure.
Where he bridges a brook or wades through a waterway
ill fortune brings him face-to-face with a foe
so foul or fierce he is bound to use force.
So momentous are his travels among the mountains
to tell just a tenth would be a tall order.
Here he scraps with serpents and snarling wolves,
here he tangles with wodwos causing trouble in the crags,
or with bulls and bears and the odd wild boar.
Hard on his heels through the highlands come giants.
Only diligence and faith in the face of death
will keep him from becoming a corpse or carrion.
And the wars were one thing, but winter was worse:
clouds shed their cargo of crystallized rain
which froze as it fell to the frost-glazed earth.
With nerves frozen numb he napped in his armor,
bivouacked in the blackness amongst bare rocks
where meltwater streamed from the snow-capped summits
and high overhead hung chandeliers of ice.
So in peril and pain Sir Gawain made progress,
crisscrossing the countryside until Christmas
Eve. Then
at that time of tiding,
he prayed to highest heaven.
Let Mother Mary guide him
towards some house or haven.

Next morning he moves on, skirts the mountainside,
descends a deep forest, densely overgrown,
with ancient oaks in huddles of hundreds
and vaulting hills above each half of the valley.
Hazel and hawthorn are interwoven,
decked and draped in damp, shaggy moss,
and bedraggled birds on bare, black branches
pipe pitifully into the piercing cold.
Under cover of the canopy he girded Gringolet
through mud and marshland, a most mournful man,
concerned and afraid in case he should fail
in the worship of our Deity, who, on that date
was born the Virgin's son to save our souls.
He prayed with heavy heart. "Father, hear me,
and Lady Mary, our mother most mild,
let me happen on some house where mass might be heard,
and matins in the morning; meekly I ask,
and here I utter my pater, ave
and creed."
He rides the path and prays,
dismayed by his misdeeds,
and signs Christ's cross and says,
"Be near me in my need."

No sooner had he signed himself three times
than he became aware, in those woods, of high walls
in a moat, on a mound, bordered by the boughs
of thick-trunked timber which trimmed the water.
The most commanding castle a knight ever kept,
positioned in a site of sweeping parkland
with a palisade of pikes pitched in the earth
in the midst of tall trees for two miles or more.
From the corner of his eye this castle became clearer
as it sparkled and shone within shimmering oaks,
and with helmet in hand he offered up thanks
to Jesus and Saint Julian, both gentle and good,
who had courteously heard him and heeded his cry.
"A lodging at last. So allow it, my Lord."
Then he girded Gringolet with his gilded spurs,
and purely by chance chose the principal approach
to the building, which brought him to the end of the bridge
with haste.
The drawbridge stood withdrawn,
the front gates were shut fast.

Such well-constructed walls
would blunt the storm wind's blast.

In the saddle of his steed he halts on the slope
of the delving moat with its double ditch.
Out of water of wondrous depth, the walls
then loomed overhead to a heavenly height,
course after course of crafted stone,
then battlements embellished in the boldest style
and turrets arranged around the ramparts
with lockable loopholes set into the lookouts.
The knight had not seen a more stunning structure.
Further in, his eye was drawn to a hall
attended, architecturally, by many tall towers
with a series of spires spiking the air
all crowned by carvings exquisitely cut.
Uncountable chimneys the color of chalk
sprutted from the roof and sparkled in the sun.
So perfect was that vision of painted pinnacles
clustered within the castle's enclosure
it appeared that the place was cut from paper.
Then a notion occurred to that noble knight:
to inveigle a visit, get invited inside,
to be hosted and housed, and all the holy days
remain.
Responding to his call
a pleasant porter came,
a watchman on the wall,
who welcomed Sir Gawain.

"Good morning," said our man, "will you bear a message
to the owner of this hall and ask him for shelter?"
"By Saint Peter," said the porter, "it'll be my pleasure,
and I'm willing to bet you'll be welcome to a bed."
Then he went on his way, but came back at once
with a group who had gathered to greet the stranger;
the drawbridge came down and they crossed the ditch
and knelt in the frost in front of the knight
to welcome this man in a way deemed worthy.
Then they yielded to their guest, yanked open the gate,
and bidding them to rise he rode across the bridge.
He was assisted from the saddle by several men
and the strongest amongst them stabled his steed.
Then knights, and the squires of knights, drew near,

to escort him, with courtesy, into the castle.
As he took off his helmet, many hasty hands
reached out to receive it and to serve this stranger,
and his sword and his shield were taken aside.
Then he made himself known to nobles and knights
and proud fellows pressed forwards to confer their respects.
Still heavy with armor he was led to the hall
where a fire burned bright with the fiercest flames.
Then the master of the manor emerged from his chamber,
to greet him in the hall with all due honor,
saying, "Behave in my house as your heart pleases.
To whatever you want you are welcome, do what
you will."
"My thanks," Gawain exclaimed,
"May Christ reward you well."
Then firmly, like good friends,
they hugged and held awhile.

Gawain gazed at the lord who greeted him so gracefully,
the great one who governed that grand estate,
powerful and large, in the prime of his life,
with a bushy beard as red as a beaver's,
steady in his stance, solid of build,
with a fiery face but with fine conversation:
a man quite capable, it occurred to Gawain,
of keeping such a castle and captaining his knights.
Escorted to his quarters the lord quickly orders
that a servant be assigned to assist Gawain,
and many were willing to wait on his word.
They brought him to a bedroom, beautifully furnished
with fine silken fabrics finished in gold
and curious coverlets lavishly quilted
in bloodless ermine and embroidered to each border.
Curtains ran on cords through red-gold rings,
tapestries from Toulouse and Turkistan
were fixed against walls and fitted underfoot.
With humorous banter Gawain was helped out
of his chain-mail coat and costly clothes,
then they rushed to bring him an array of robes
of the choicest cloth. He chose, and changed,
and as soon as he stood in that stunning gown
with its flowing skirts which suited his shape
it almost appeared to the persons present
that spring, with its spectrum of colors, had sprung;

so alive and lean were that young man's limbs
a nobler creature Christ had never created, they declared.
This knight,
whose country was unclear,
now seemed to them by sight
a prince without a peer
in fields where fierce men fight.

In front of a flaming fireside a chair
was pulled into place for Gawain, and padded
with covers and quilts all cleverly stitched,
then a cape was cast across the knight
of rich brown cloth with embroidered borders,
finished inside with the finest furs,
ermine, to be exact, and a hood which echoed it.
Resplendently dressed he settled in his seat;
as his limbs thawed, so his thoughts lightened.
Soon a table was set on sturdy trestles
covered entirely with a clean white cloth
and cruets of salt and silver spoons.
In a while he washed and went to his meal.
Staff came quickly and served him in style
with several soups all seasoned to taste,
double helpings as was fitting, and a feast of fish,
some baked in bread, some browned over flames,
some boiled or steamed, some stewed in spices
and subtle sauces to tantalize his tongue.
Four or five times he called it a feast,
and the courteous company happily cheered him
along:
"On penance plates you dine—
there's better board to come."
The warming, heady wine
then freed his mind for fun.

Now through tactful talk and tentative enquiry
polite questions are put to this prince;
he responds respectfully, and speaks of his journey
from the Court of Arthur, King of Camelot,
royalty, and ruler of the Round Table,
and he says they now sit with Gawain himself,
who has come here at Christmastime quite by chance.
Once the master has gathered that his guest is Gawain
he thinks it so thrilling he laughs out loud.

All the men of that manor were of the same mind,910
being keen and quick to appear in his presence,
this person famed for prowess and purity,
whose noble skills were sung to the skies,
whose life was the stuff of legend and lore.
Then knight spoke softly to knight, saying
"Watch now, we'll witness his graceful ways,
hear the faultless phrasing of flawless speech;
if we listen we will learn the merits of language
since we have in our hall a man of high honor.
Ours is a generous and giving God920
to grant that we welcome Gawain as our guest
as we sing of His birth who was born to save us.
We few
shall learn a lesson here
in tact and manners true,
and hopefully we'll hear
love's tender language, too."

Once dinner was done Gawain drew to his feet
and darkness neared as day became dusk.
Chaplains went off to the castle's chapels930
to sound the bells hard, to signal the hour
of evensong, summoning each and every soul.
The lord goes alone, then his lady arrives,
concealing herself in a private pew.
Gawain attends, too; tugged by his sleeve
he is steered to a seat, led by the lord
who greets Gawain by name as his guest.
No man in the world is more welcome, are his words.
For that he is thanked. And they hug there and then
and sit as a pair through the service in prayer.940
Then she who desired to see this stranger
came from her closet with her sisterly crew.
She was fairest amongst them—her face, her flesh,
her complexion, her quality, her bearing, her body,
more glorious than Guinevere, or so Gawain thought,
and in the chancel of the church they exchanged courtesies.
She was hand in hand with a lady to her left,
someone altered by age, an ancient dame,
well respected, it seemed, by the servants at her side.
Those ladies were not the least bit alike:950
one woman was young, one withered by years.
The body of the beauty seemed to bloom with blood,

the cheeks of the crone were wattled and slack.
One was clothed in a kerchief clustered with pearls
which shone like snow—snow on the slopes
of her upper breast and bright bare throat.
The other was noosed and knotted at the neck,
her chin enveloped in chalk-white veils,
her forehead fully enfolded in silk
with detailed designs at the edges and hems;960
nothing bare, except for the black of her brows
and the eyes and nose and naked lips
which were chapped and bleared and a sorrowful sight.
A grand old mother, a matriarch she might
be hailed.
Her trunk was square and squat,
her buttocks bulged and swelled.
Most men would sooner squint
at her whose hand she held.

Then Gawain glanced at the gracious-looking woman,970
and by leave of the lord he approached those ladies
saluting the elder with a long, low bow,
holding the other for a moment in his arms,
kissing her respectfully and speaking with courtesy.
They request his acquaintance, and quickly he offers
to serve them unswervingly should they say the word.
They take him between them and talk as they walk
to a hearth full of heat, and hurriedly ask
for specially spiced cakes, which are speedily fetched,
and wine filled each goblet again and again.980
Frequently the lord would leap to his feet
insisting that mirth and merriment be made:
hauling off his hood he hoisted it on a spear—
a prize, he promised, to the person providing
most comfort and cheer at Christmastime.
“And my fellows and friends shall help in my fight
to see that it hangs from no head but my own.”
So the laughter of that lord lights up the room,
and Gawain and the gathering are gladdened by games
till late.990
So late, his lordship said,
that lamps should burn with light.
Then, blissful, bound for bed,
Sir Gawain waved good night.

So the morning dawns when man remembers
the day our Redeemer was born to die,
and every house on earth is joyful for Lord Jesus.
Their day was no different, being a diary of delights:
banquets and buffets were beautifully cooked
and dutifully served to diners at the dais.1000
The ancient elder sat highest at the table
with the lord, I believe, in the chair to her left;
the sweeter one and Gawain took seats in the center
and were first at the feast to dine, then food
was carried around as custom decrees
and served to each man as his status deserved.
There was feasting, there was fun, and such feelings of joy
as could not be conveyed by quick description,
yet to tell it in detail would take too much time.
But I'm aware that Gawain and the beautiful woman1010
found such comfort and closeness in each other's company
through warm exchanges of whispered words
and refined conversation free from foulness
that their pleasure surpassed all princely sports
by far.
Beneath the din of drums
men followed their affairs,
and trumpets thrilled and thrummed
as those two tended theirs.

They drank and danced all day and the next1020
and danced and drank the day after that,
then Saint John's Day passed with a gentler joy
as the Christmas feasting came to a close.
Guests were to go in the grayness of dawn,
so they laughed and dined as the dusk darkened,
swaying and swirling to music and song.
Then at last, in the lateness, they upped and left
toward distant parts along different paths.
Gawain offered his good-byes, but was ushered by his host
to his host's own chamber and the heat of its chimney,1030
waylaid by the lord so the lord might thank him
profoundly and profusely for the favor he had shown
in honoring his house at that hallowed season
and lighting every corner of the castle with his character.
"For as long as I live my life shall be better
that Gawain was my guest at God's own feast."
"By God," said Gawain, "but the gratitude goes to you.

May the High King of Heaven repay your honor.
Your requests are now this knight's commands.
I am bound by your bidding, no boon is too high
to say."
At length his lordship tried
to get his guest to stay.
But proud Gawain replied
he must now make his way.

Then the lord, being curious, made a courteous inquiry
of what desperate deed in the depth of winter
should coax him from Camelot, so quickly and alone,
before Christmas was over in his king's court.
"What you ask," said the knight, "you shall now know.
A most pressing matter prized me from that place:
I myself am summoned to seek out a site
and I have not the faintest idea where to find it.
But find it I must by the first of the year, and not fail
for all the acres in England, so help me Lord.
And in speaking of my quest, I respectfully request
that you tell me, in truth, if you have heard the tale
of a green chapel, or the grounds where a Green Chapel stands,
or the guardian of those grounds who is colored green.
For I am bound by a bond agreed by us both
to link up with him there, should I live that long.
As dawn on New Year's Day draws near,
if God sees fit, I shall face that freak
more happily than I would the most wondrous wealth!
With your blessing, therefore, I must follow my feet.
In three short days my destiny is due,
and I would rather drop dead than default from duty."
Then laughing out loud the lord said, "Relax!
I'll direct you to your rendezvous when the time is right,
you'll get to the green chapel, so give up your grieving.
You can bask in your bed, bide your time,
save your fond farewells till the first of the year
and still meet him by midmorning to do as you may.
So stay.
A guide will get you there
at dawn on New Year's Day.
The place you need is near,
two miles at most away."

Then Gawain was giddy with gladness, and declared,

“For this more than anything I thank you thoroughly.
Now my sight is set, and I’ll stay in your service
until that time, attending every task.”
The lord squeezed Gawain’s arm and seated him at his side,
and called for the ladies to keep them company.
There was pleasure aplenty in their private talk:
the lips of the lord ran wild with words,
like the mouth of a madman, not knowing his own mind.
Then speaking to Gawain, he suddenly shouted:
“You have sworn to serve me, whatever I instruct.
Will you hold to that oath right here and now?”
“You may trust my tongue,” said Gawain, in truth,
“for within these walls I am servant to your will.”
The lord said warmly, “You were weary and worn,
hollow with hunger, harrowed by tiredness,
yet you joined in my reveling right royally every night.
You relax as you like, lie in your bed
until mass tomorrow, then go to your meal
where my wife will be waiting; she will sit at your side
to accompany and comfort you in my absence from court.
So lounge:
at dawn I’ll rise and ride
to hunt with horse and hound.”
The gracious knight agreed
and, bending low, he bowed.

“Furthermore,” said the master, “let’s make a pact.
Here’s a wager: what I win in the woods will be yours,
and what you gain while I’m gone you will give to me.
Young sir, let’s swap, and strike a bond,
let a bargain be a bargain, for worse or for better.”
“By God,” said Gawain, “I agree to the terms,
and I find it pleasing that you favor such fun.”
“Let drink be served and we’ll seal the deal,”
the lord cried loudly, and everyone laughed.
So they reveled and caroused uproariously,
those lords and ladies, for as long as they liked,
then they tired and they slowed and they stood and they spoke
with immaculate exchanges of manners and remarks.
And with parting kisses the party dispersed,
footmen going forward with flaring torches,
and every lord was led at last towards bed,
to dream.
Before they part the pair

repeat their pact again.
That lord was well aware
of how to host a game.

FITT III

Well before sunrise the servants were stirring;
the guests who were going had called for their grooms
and they scurried to the stables to ready the steeds,
trussing and tying all the trammel and tack.
The high-ranking nobles got ready to ride,
jumped stylishly to their saddles and seized the reins,
then cantered away on their chosen courses.
The lord of that land was by no means last
to be rigged out for riding with the rest of his men.
After mass he wolfed down a meal, then made
for the hunting grounds with his hunting horn.
So as morning was lifting its lamp to the land
his lordship and his huntsmen were high on horseback,
and the canny kennel men had coupled the hounds
and opened the cages and called them out.
On the bugles they blew three bellowing notes
to a din of baying and barking, and the dogs
which chased or wandered were chastened by whip.
As I heard it, we're talking a hundred top hunters
at least.
The handlers hold their hounds,
the huntsmen's hounds run free.
Each bugle blast rebounds
between the trunks of trees.

As the cry went up the wild creatures quaked.
The deer in the dale, quivering with dread
hurtled to high ground, but were headed off
by the ring of beaters who bawled and roared.
The stags of the herd with their high-branched heads
and the broad-horned bucks were allowed to pass by,
for the lord of the land had laid down a law
that man should not maim the male in close season.
But the hinds were halted with hollers and whoops
and the din drove the does to sprint for the dells.
Then the eye can see that the air is all arrows:
all across the forest they flashed and flickered,
biting through hides with their broad heads.
What! They bleat as they bleed and they die on the banks,

and always the hounds are hard on their heels,
and the hunters on horseback come hammering behind
with stone-splitting cries, as if cliffs had collapsed.
And those animals which escaped the aim of the archers
were steered from the slopes down to rivers and streams
and set upon and seized at the stations below.
So perfect and practiced were the men at their posts1170
and so great were the greyhounds which grappled with the deer
that prey was pounced on and dispatched with speed
and force.
The lord's heart leaps with life.
Now on, now off his horse
all day he hacks and drives.
And dusk comes in due course.

So through a lime-leaf border the lord led the hunt,
while snug in his sheets lay slumbering Gawain,
dozing as the daylight dappled the walls,1180
under a splendid cover, enclosed by curtains.
And while snoozing he heard a slyly made sound,
the sigh of a door swinging slowly aside.
From below the bedding he brings up his head
and lifts the corner of the curtain a little
wondering warily what it might be.
It was she, the lady, looking her loveliest,
most quietly and craftily closing the door,
nearing the bed. The knight felt nervous;
lying back he assumed the shape of sleep1190
as she stole towards him with silent steps,
then clasped the curtain and crept inside,
then sat down softly at the side of his bed.
And awaited him wakening for a good long while.
Gawain lay still, in his state of false sleep,
turning over in his mind what this matter might mean,
and where the lady's unlikely visit might lead.
Yet he said to himself, "Instead of this stealth
I should openly ask what her actions imply."
So he stirred and stretched, turned on his side,1200
lifted his eyelids and, looking alarmed,
signed himself hurriedly with his hand, as if saving
his life.
Her chin is pale, her cheeks
are ruddy red with health;
her smile is sweet, she speaks

with lips that love to laugh:

"Good morning, Sir Gawain," said the graceful lady,
"You sleep so soundly one might sidle in here.
You're tricked and you're trapped! But let's make a truce,
or I'll besiege you in your bed, and you'd better believe me."
She giggled girlishly as she teased good Gawain.
The man in the bed said, "Good morning, ma'am.
I'll contentedly attend whatever task you set,
and in serving your desires I shall seek your mercy,
which seems my best plan, in the circumstances!"
And he loaded his light-hearted words with laughter.
"But my gracious lady, if you grant me leave,
will you pardon this prisoner and prompt him to rise,
then I'll quit these covers and pull on my clothes,
and our words will flow more freely back and forth."
"Not so, beautiful sir," the sweet lady said.
"Bide in your bed—my own plan is better.
I'll tuck in your covers corner to corner,
then playfully parley with the man I have pinned.
Because I know your name—the knight Sir Gawain,
famed through the realm whichever road he rides,
whose princely honor is highly praised
amongst lords and ladies and everyone alive.
And right here you lie. And we are left all alone,
with my husband and his huntsmen away in the hills
and the servants snoring and my maids asleep
and the door to this bedroom barred with a bolt.
I have in my house an honored guest
so I'll take my time; I'll be talking to him for
a while.
You're free to have my all,
do with me what you will.
I'll come just as you call
and swear to serve you well."

"In good faith," said Gawain, "such gracious flattery,
though in truth I'm not nearly such a noble knight.
I don't dare to receive the respect you describe
and in no way warrant such worthy words.
But by God, I'd be glad, if you give me the right,
to serve your desires, and with action or speech
bring you perfect pleasure. The honor would be priceless."
Said the gracious lady, "Sir Gawain, in good faith,

how improper on my part if I were to imply
any slur or slight on your status as a knight.
But what lady in this land wouldn't latch the door,
wouldn't rather hold you as I do here—
in the company of your clever conversation,
forgetting all grief and engaging in joy—
than hug to her heart a horde of gold?
I praise the Lord who upholds the high heavens,
for I have what I hoped for above all else by
his grace."
That lovely looking maid,
she charmed him and she chased.
But every move she made
he countered, case by case.

"Madam," said our man, "may Mary bless you,
in good faith, you are kind and the fairest of the fair.
Some fellows are praised for the feats they perform;
I hardly deserve to receive such respect,
whereas you are genuinely joyful and generous."
"By Mary," she declared, "it's quite the contrary.
Were I the wealthiest woman in the world
with priceless pearls in the palm of my hand
to bargain with and buy the best of all men,
then for all the signs you have shown me, sir,
of kindness, courtesy and exquisite looks—
a picture of perfection now proved to be true—
no person on this planet would be picked before you."
"In fairness," said Gawain, "you found far better.
But I'm proud of the price you would pay from your purse,
and will swear to serve you as my sovereign forever.
Let Christ now know that Gawain is your knight."
Then they muse on many things through morning and midday,
and the lady stares with a loving look,
but Gawain is a gentleman and remains on guard,
and although no woman could be warmer or more winning,
he is cool in his conduct, on account of the scene he
foresees:
the strike he must receive,
as cruel fate decrees.
The lady begs her leave—
at once Gawain agrees.

She glanced at him, laughed and gave her good-bye,

then stood, and stunned him with astounding words:
“May the Lord repay you for your prize performance.
But I know that Gawain could never be your name.”
“But why not?” asked the knight, in need of an answer,
afraid that some fault in his manners had failed him.
The beautiful woman blessed him, then rebuked him:
“A good man like Gawain, so greatly regarded,
the embodiment of courtliness to the bones of his being,
could never have lingered so long with a lady
without craving a kiss, as politeness requires,
or coaxing a kiss with his closing words.”
“Very well,” said Gawain, “let’s do as you wish.
If a kiss is your request I shall keep my promise
faithfully to fulfil you, so ask no further.”
The lady comes close, cradles him in her arms,
leans nearer and nearer, then kisses the knight.
Then they courteously commend one another to Christ,
and without one more word the woman is away.
He leaps from where he lies at a heck of a lick,
calls for his chamberlain, chooses his clothes,
makes himself ready then marches off to mass.
Then he went to a meal which was made and waiting,
and was merry and amused till the moon had silvered
the view.

No man felt more at home
tucked in between those two,
the cute one and the crone.
Their gladness grew and grew.

And the lord of the land still led the hunt,
driving hinds to their death through holts and heaths,
and by the setting of the sun had slaughtered so many
of the does and other deer that it beggared belief.
Then finally the folk came flocking to one spot
and quickly they collected and counted the kill.
Then the leading lords and their left-hand men
chose the finest deer—those fullest with fat—
and ordered them cut open by those skilled in the art.
They assessed and sized every slain creature
and even on the feeblest found two fingers worth of fat.
Through the sliced-open throat they seized the stomach
and the butchered innards were bound in a bundle.
Next they lopped off the legs and peeled back the pelt
and hooked out the bowels through the broken belly,

but carefully, being cautious not to cleave the knot.
Then they clasped the throat, and clinically they cut
the gullet from the windpipe, then garbaged the guts.
Then the shoulder blades were severed with sharp knives
and slotted through a slit so the hide stayed whole.
Then the beasts were prized apart at the breast,
and they went to work on the gralloching again,
riving open the front as far as the hind fork,
fetching out the offal, then with further purpose
filleting the ribs in the recognized fashion.
And the spine was subject to a similar process,
being pared to the haunch so it held as one piece
then hoisting it high and hacking it off.
And its name is the numbles, as far as I know, and
just that.
Its hind legs pulled apart
they slit the fleshy flaps,
then cleave and quickly start
to break it down its back.

Then the heads and necks of hinds were hewn off,
and the choice meat of the flanks chopped away from the chine,
and a fee for the crows was cast into the copse.
Then each side was skewered, stabbed through the ribs
and heaved up high, hung by its hocks,
and every person was paid with appropriate portions.
Using pelts for plates, the dogs pogged out
on liver and lights and stomach linings
and a blended sop of blood and bread.
The kill horn was blown and the bloodhounds bayed.
Then hauling their meat they headed for home,
sounding howling wails on their hunting horns,
and as daylight died they had covered the distance
and were back in the abode where Gawain sat biding
his time.
Warm friends, warm flames will meet
the huntsman's home return.
Gawain as well will greet
his host. Bright hearth fires burn.

Then the whole of the household was ordered to the hall,
and the women as well with their maids in waiting.
And once assembled he instructs the servants
that the venison be revealed in full view,

and in excellent humor he asked that Gawain
should see for himself the size of the kill,
and showed him the side slabs sliced from the ribs.
“Are you pleased with this pile? Have I won your praise?
Does my skill at this sport deserve your esteem?”
“Why yes,” said the other. “It’s the hugest haul
I have seen, out of season, for several years.”
“And I give it all to you, Gawain,” said the master,
“for according to our contract it is yours to claim.”
“Just so,” said Gawain, “and I’ll say the same,
for whatever I’ve won within these walls
such gains will be graciously given to you.”
So he held out his arms and hugged the lord
and kissed him in the kindliest way he could.
“You’re welcome to my winnings—to my one profit,
though I’d gladly have given you any greater prize.”
“I’m grateful,” said the lord, “and Gawain, this gift
would carry more worth if you cared to confess
by what wit you won it. And when. And where.”
“That wasn’t our pact,” he replied. “So don’t pry.
You’ll be given nothing greater, the agreement we have
holds good!”
They laugh aloud and trade
wise words which match their mood.
When supper’s meal is made
they dine on dainty food.

Later, they lounged by the lord’s fire,
and were served unstintingly with subtle wines
and agreed to the game again next morning
and to play by the rules already in place:
any takings to be traded between the two men
at night when they met, no matter what the merchandise.
They concurred on this contract in front of the court,
and drank on the deal, and went on drinking
till late, when they took their leave at last,
and every person present disappeared to bed.
By the third cackle of the crowing cock
the lord and his liegemen are leaping from their beds,
and mass and the morning meal are taken,
and riders are rigged out ready to run as
day dawns.
They leave the levels, loud
with howling hunting horns.

The huntsmen loose the hounds
through thickets and through thorns.

Soon they picked up a scent at the side of a swamp
and the hounds which first found it were urged ahead
by a wild-voiced hunter and his wailing words.
The pack responded with vigor and pace,
alert to the trail, forty lurchers at least.
Then such a raucous din rose up all around them
it ricocheted and rang through the rocky slopes.
The hounds were mushed with hollers and the horn,
then suddenly they swerved and swarmed together
in a wood, between a pool and a precipice.
On a mound, near a cliff, on the margins of a marsh
where toppled stones lay scattered and strewn
they coursed towards their quarry with huntsmen close at heel.
Then a crew of them ringed the hillock and the cliff,
until they were certain that inside their circle
was the beast whose being the bloodhounds had sensed.
Then they riled the creature with their rowdy ruckus,
and suddenly he breaks the barrier of beaters,
—the biggest of wild boars has bolted from his cover—
ancient in years and estranged from the herd,
savage and strong, a most massive swine
with a fearsome grunt. And the group were disgruntled,
for three were thrown down by the first of his thrusts,
then he fled away fast before inflicting further damage.
The other huntsmen bawled “hi” and “hay, hay”
blasted on their bugles, blew to regroup,
so the dogs and the men made a merry din,
tracking him nosily, testing him time and time
again.
The boar would stand at bay
and aim to maul and maim
the thronging dogs, and they
would yelp and yowl in pain.

The front men stepped forward to fire a shot
aimed arrows at him which were often on target,
but their points could not pierce his impenetrable shoulders
and bounced away from his bristly brow.
The smooth, slender shafts splintered into pieces,
and the heads glanced away from wherever they hit.
Battered and baited by such bombardment,

in frenzied fury he flies at the men,
hurts them horribly as he hurtles past
so that many grew timid and retreated a tad.
But the master of the manor gave chase on his mount,
the boldest of beast hunters, his bugle blaring,
trumpeting the tally-ho and tearing through thickets
till the setting sun slipped from the western sky.
So the day was spent in pursuits of this style,
while our lovable young lord had not left his bed,
and, cosseted in costly quilted covers, there he
remained.
The lady, at first light,
did not neglect Gawain,
but went to wake the knight
and meant to change his mind.

She approaches the curtains, parts them and peeps in,
at which Sir Gawain makes her welcome at once,
and with prompt speech she replies to the prince,
settling by his side and giggling sweetly,
looking at him lovingly before launching her words.
"If this is Gawain who greets me, I am galled
that a man so dedicated to doing his duty
cannot heed the first rule of honorable behavior,
which has entered through one ear and exited the other;
you have already lost what yesterday you learned
in the truest lesson my tongue could teach."
"What lesson?" asked the knight. "I know of none,
though if discourtesy has occurred then correct me, of course."
"I encouraged you to kiss," the lady said kindly,
"and to claim one quickly when one is required,
an act which ennobles any knight worth the name."
"Dear lady," said the other, "don't think such a thing,
I dare not kiss in case I am declined.
If refused, I'd be at fault for offering in the first place."
"In truth," she told him, "you cannot be turned down.
If someone were so snooty as to snub your advance,
a man like you has the means of his muscles."
"Yes, by God," said Gawain, "what you say holds good.
But such heavy-handedness is frowned on in my homeland,
and so is any gift not given with grace.
What kiss you request I will courteously supply,
have what you want or hold off, whichever
the case."

So bending from above
the fair one kissed his face.
The two then talk of love:
its grief; also its grace.

"I would like to learn," said the noble lady,
"and please find no offence, but how can it follow
that a lord so lively and young in years,
a champion in chivalry across the country—
and in chivalry, the chiefmost aspect to choose,
as all knights acknowledge, is loyalty in love,
for when tales of truthful knights are told
in both title and text the topic they describe
is how lords have laid down their lives for love,
endured for many days love's dreadful ordeal,
then vented their feelings with avenging valor
by bringing great bliss to a lady's bedroom—
and you the most notable of all noble knights,
whose fame goes before him . . . yes, how can it follow
that twice I have taken this seat at your side
yet you have not spoken the smallest syllable
which belongs to love or anything like it.
A knight so courteous and considerate in his service
really ought to be eager to offer this pupil
some lessons in love, and to lead by example.
Is he actually ignorant, this man of eminence,
or does he deem me too duncelike to hear of dalliances?
I come
to learn of love and more,
a lady all alone.
Perform for me before
my husband heads for home."

"In faith," said Gawain, "may God grant you fortune.
It gives me great gladness and seems a good game
that a woman so worthy should want to come here
and be happy and good hearted with a humble knight
unfit for her favors—I am flattered indeed.
But to take on the task of explaining true love
or touch on the topics those love tales tell of,
with yourself, who I sense has more insight and skill
in the art than I have, or even a hundred
of the likes of me, however long we live,
would be somewhat presumptuous, I have to say.

But to the best of my ability I'll do your bidding,
bound as I am to honor you forever
and to serve you as long as our Savior preserves me!"
So the lady tempted and teased him, trying
to enmesh him in whatever mischief she had in mind.
But fairly and without fault he defended himself,
no evil in either of them, only ecstasy
that day.
At length, when they had laughed,
the woman kissed Gawain.
Politely then she left
and went her own sweet way.

Roused and risen he was ready for mass.
The meal of the morning was made and served,
then he loitered with the ladies the length of the day
while the lord of the land ranged left and right
in pursuit of that pig which stampeded through the uplands,
breaking his best hounds with its back-snapping bite
when it stood embattled . . . then bowmen would strike,
goading it to gallop into open ground
where the air was alive with the huntsman's arrows.
That boar made the best men flinch and bolt,
till at last his legs were like lead beneath him,
and he hobbled away to hunker in a hole
by a stony rise at the side of a stream.
With the bank at his back he scrapes and burrows,
frothing and foaming foully at the mouth,
whetting his white tusks. The hunters waited,
irked by the effort of aiming from afar
but daunted by the danger of daring to venture
too near.
So many men before
had fallen prey. They feared
that fierce and frenzied boar
whose tusks could slash and tear.

Till his lordship hacks up, urging on his horse,
spots the swine at standstill encircled by men,
then handsomely dismounts and unhands his horse,
brandishes a bright sword and goes bounding onwards,
wades through the water to where the beast waits.
Aware that the man was wafting a weapon
the hog's hairs stood on end, and its howling grunt

made the fellows there fear for their master's fate.
Then the boar burst forward, bounded at the lord,
so that beast and hunter both went bundling
into white water, and the swine came off worst,
because the moment they clashed the man found his mark,
knifing the boar's neck, nailing his prey,
hammering it to the hilt, bursting the hog's heart.
Screaming, it was swept downstream, almost slipping
beneath.
At least a hundred hounds
latch on with tearing teeth.
Then, dragged to drier ground,
the dogs complete its death.

The kill was blown on many blaring bugle
and the unhurt hunters hollered and whooped.
The chief amongst them, in charge of the chase,
commanded the bloodhounds to bay at the boar,
then one who was wise in woodland ways
began carefully to cut and carve up the carcass.
First he hacks off its head and hoists it aloft,
then roughly rives it right along the spine;
he gouges out the guts and grills them over coals,
and blended with bread they are tidbits for the bloodhounds.
Next he fetches out the fillets of glimmering flesh
and retrieves the intestines in time-honored style,
then the two sides are stitched together intact
and proudly displayed on a strong pole.
So with the swine swinging they swagger home,
bearing the boar's head before that huntsman
who had fought with his fists in the ford till the beast
was slain.
The day then dragged, it seemed,
before he found Gawain,
who comes when called, most keen
to countenance the claim.

Now the lord is loud with words and laughter
and speaks excitedly when he sees Sir Gawain;
he calls for the ladies plus the company of the court
and he shows off the meat slabs and shares the story
of the hog's hulking hugeness, and the full horror
of the fight to the finish as it fled through the forest.
And Gawain is quick to compliment the conquest,

praising it as proof of the lord's prowess,1630
for such prime pieces of perfect pork
and such sides of swine were a sight to be seen.
Then admiringly he handles the hog's great head,
feigning fear to flatter the master's feelings.
"Now Gawain," said the lord, "I give you this game,
as our wager warranted, as well you remember."
"Certainly," said Sir Gawain. "It shall be so.
And graciously I shall give you my gains in exchange."
He catches him by the neck and courteously kisses him,
then a second time kisses him in a similar style.1640
"Now we're even," said Gawain, "at this evening's end;
the clauses of our contract have been kept and you have what
I owe."
"By Saint Giles," the just lord says,
"This knight's the best I know.
By wagering this way
his gains will grow and grow."

Then the trestle tables were swiftly assembled
and cast with fine cloths. A clear, living light
from the waxen torches awakened the walls.1650
Places were set and supper was served,
and a din arose as they reveled in a ring
around the fire in the fireplace, and the feasting party
sang song after song, at supper and beyond,
both traditional ditties and carols of the day,
with as much amusement as a mouth could mention.
The young woman and Gawain sat together all the while.
And so loving was that lady towards the young lord,
with stolen glances and secret smiles
that it muddled his mind and sent him half mad,1660
but to snub a noblewoman was not in his nature,
and though tongues might wag he returned her attention
all night.
Before his friends retire
his lordship leads the knight,
heads for his hearth and fire
to linger by its light.

They supped and swapped stories, and spoke again
of the night to come next, which was New Year's Eve.
Gawain pleaded politely to depart by morning,1670
so in two days' time he might honor his treaty.

But the lord was unswerving, insisting that he stayed:
"As an honest soul I swear on my heart,
you shall find the Green Chapel to finalize your affairs
long before dawn on New Year's Day.
So lie in your room and laze at your leisure
while I ride my estate, and, as our terms dictate,
we'll trade our trophies when the hunt returns.
I have tested you twice and found you truthful.
But think tomorrow *third time throw best.*
Now, a lord can feel low whenever he likes,
so let's chase cheerfulness while we have the chance."
So those gentlemen agreed that Gawain would stay,
and they took more drink, then by torchlight retired to
their beds.
Our man then sleeps, a most
reposed and peaceful rest.
As hunters must, his host
is up at dawn and dressed.

After mass the master grabs a meal with his men
and asks for his mount on that marvelous morning.
All those grooms engaged to go with their lord
were high on their horses before the hall gates.
The fields were dazzling, fixed with frost,
and the crown of sunrise rose scarlet and crimson,
scalding and scattering cloud from the sky.
At the fringe of the forest the dogs were set free
and the rumpus of the horns went ringing through the rocks.
They fall on the scent of a fox, and follow,
turning and twisting as they sniff out the trail.
A young harrier yowls and a huntsman yells,
then the pack come rushing to pick up the reek,
running as a rabble along the right track.
The fox scurries ahead, they scamper behind,
and pursue him at speed when he comes within sight,
haranguing him with horrific ranting howls.
Now and then he doubles back through thorny thickets,
or halts and harkens in the hem of a hedge,
until finally, by a hollow, he hurdles a fence,
and carefully he creeps by the edge of a copse,
convinced that his cunning has conned those canines!
But unawares he wanders where they lie in wait,
where greyhounds are gathered together, a group
of three.

He springs back with a start,
then twists and turns and flees.
With heavy, heaving heart
he tracks towards the trees.

Such earthly elation, hearing those hounds
as they massed to meet him, marauding together,
and they bayed bloodily at the sight of his being,
as if clustering cliffs had crashed to the ground.
Here he was ambushed by bushwhacking huntsmen
waiting with a welcome of wounding words;
there he was threatened and branded a thief,
and always the hounds allowed him no ease.
Often, in the open, the pack tried to pounce,
then that crafty Reynard would creep into cover.
So his lordship and his lords were merrily led
in this manner through the mountains until midafternoon,
while our handsome hero snoozed contentedly at home,
kept from the cold of the morning by curtains.
But love would not let her ladyship sleep
and the fervor she felt in her heart would not fade.
She rose from her rest and rushed to his room
in a flowing robe that reached to the floor
and was finished inside with fine-trimmed furs.
Her head went unhooded, but heavenly gems
were entwined in her tresses in clusters of twenty.
She wore nothing on her face; her neck was naked,
and her shoulders were bare to both back and breast.
She comes into his quarters and closes the door,
makes her way to the window and throws it open,
then sweet and swift is the speech she intends for
his ear.
"Oh, sir, how can you sleep
when morning comes so clear?"
And though his dreams are deep
he cannot help but hear.

Yes he dozes in a daze, dreams and mutters
like a mournful man with his mind on dark matters—
how destiny might deal him a death blow on the day
when he grapples with the giant in the Green Chapel;
of how the strike of the axe must be suffered without struggle.
But sensing her presence there he surfaces from sleep,
drags himself out of his dreams to address her.

Laughing warmly she walks towards him
and finds his face with the friendliest kiss.
In a worthy style he welcomes the woman
and seeing her so lovely and alluringly dressed,
every feature so faultless, her complexion so fine,
a passionate heat takes hold in his heart.
Speech tripped from their tongues and they traded smiles,
and a bond of friendship was forged there, all blissful
and bright.
They talk with tenderness
and pride, and yet their plight
is perilous unless
sweet Mary minds her knight.

For that noble princess pushed him and pressed him,
nudged him ever nearer to a limit where he needed
to allow her love or impolitely reject it.
He was careful to be courteous and avoid uncouthness,
cautious that his conduct might be classed as sinful
and counted as betrayal by the keeper of the castle.
“I shall not succumb,” he swore to himself.
With affectionate laughter he fenced and deflected
all the loving phrases which leapt from her lips.
“You shall bear the blame,” said the beautiful one,
“if you feel no love for the female you lie with,
and wound her, more than anyone on earth, to the heart.
Unless, of course, there is a lady in your life
to whom you are tied and so tightly attached
that you could not begin to break the bond.
So in honesty and trust now tell me the truth;
for the sake of all love, don’t be secretive or speak
with guile.”
“You judge wrong, by Saint John,”
he said to her, and smiled.
“There is no other one
and won’t be for a while!”

“Those words,” said the woman, “are the worst insult.
But I asked, and you answered, and now I ache.
Kiss me warmly and then I will walk in the world
in mourning like a lady who loved too much.”
Stooping and sighing she kisses him sweetly,
then withdraws from his side, saying as she stands,
“But before we part will you find me some small favor?

Will you give me some gift—a glove at least,
that might leaven my loss when we meet in my memory."
"Well it were," said Gawain. "I wish I had here
my most priceless possession as a present for your sweetness,
for over and over you deserve and are owed
the highest prize I could hope to offer.
But I would not wish on you a worthless token,
and it strikes me as unseemly that you should receive
nothing greater than a glove as a keepsake from Gawain.
I am here on an errand in an unknown land
without men bearing bags of beautiful gifts,
which I greatly regret through my regard for you;
but man must live by his means, and neither mope
or moan."
The pretty one replies:
"Nay, noble knight, you mean
you'll pass to me no prize.
No matter. Here is mine."

She offers him a ring of rich, red gold,
and the stunning stone set upon it stood proud,
beaming and burning with the brightness of the sun;
what wealth it was worth you can well imagine.
But he would not accept it, and said straight away,
"By God, no tokens will I take at this time;
I have nothing to give, so nothing will I gain."
She insists he receives it but still he resists,
and swears, on his name as a knight, to say no.
Snubbed by his decision, she said to him then,
"You refuse my ring because you find it too fine,
and don't dare to be deeply indebted to me;
so I give you my girdle, a lesser thing to gain."
From around her body she unbuckled the belt
which tightened the tunic beneath her topcoat,
a green silk girdle trimmed with gold,
exquisitely edged and hemmed by hand.
And she sweetly beseeched Sir Gawain to receive it,
in spite of its slightness, and hoped he would accept.
But still he maintained he intended to take
neither gold nor girdle, until by God's grace
the challenge he had chosen was finally achieved.
"With apologies I pray you are not displeased,
but I must firmly refuse you, no matter how flattered
I am.

For all your grace I owe
a thousand thank-you's, ma'am.
I shall through sun and snow
remain your loyal man."

"And now he sends back my silk," the lady responded,
"so simple in itself, or so it appears,
so little and unlikely, worth nothing, or less.
But the knight who knew of the power knitted in it
would pay a high price to possess it, probably.
For the body which is bound within this green belt,
as long as it is buckled robustly about him,
will be safe against those who seek to strike him,
and all the slyness on earth wouldn't see him slain."
The man mulled it over, and it entered his mind
that this girdle being given could be just the job
to save him from the strike in his challenge at the chapel.
With luck, it might let him escape with his life.
So relenting at last he let her speak,
and promptly she pressed him to take the present,
and he granted her wish, gave in with good grace,
though the woman begged him not to whisper a word
of this gift to her husband, and Gawain agreed;
those words of theirs within those walls
should stay.
His thanks are heartfelt, then.
No sooner can he say
how much it matters, when
three kisses come his way.

Then the lady departed, leaving him alone,
for the man had amused her as much as he could.
And once she has quit he clothes himself quickly,
rises and dresses in the richest of robes,
stowing the love-lace safely aside,
hiding it away from all hands and eyes.
Then he went at once to the chapel of worship,
privately approached the priest and implored him
to allow his confession, and to lead him in life
so his soul might be saved when he goes to his grave.
Then fully and frankly he spoke of his sins,
no matter how small, always seeking mercy,
calling on that counselor to clear his conscience.
The priest declares him so clean and so pure

that the Day of Doom could dawn in the morning.
Then in merrier mood he mingled with the ladies,
caroling and carousing and carrying on
as never before, until nightfall. Folk feel
and hear
and see his boundless bliss
and say, “Such charm and cheer;
he’s at his happiest
since his arrival here.”

And long let him loiter there, looked after by love.
Now the lord of the land was still leading his men,
finishing off the fox he had followed for so long.
He vaults a fence to flush out the victim,
hearing that the hounds are harrying hard.
Then Reynard scoots from a section of scrub
and the rabble of the pack rush right at his heels.
Aware of its presence the wary lord waits,
then bares his bright sword and swishes at the beast,
which shirks from its sharpness, and would have shot away
but a hound flew forward before it could flee
and under the hooves of the horses they have him,
worrying their quarry with woeful wailing.
The lord hurtles from his horse and heaves the fox up,
wrestles it from the reach of those ravenous mouths,
holds it high over head and hurrahs manfully
while the bloodthirsty bloodhounds bay and howl.
And the other huntsmen hurried with their horns
to catch sight of the slaughter and celebrate the kill.
And when the company of clansmen had come together
the buglers blew with one mighty blast,
and the others hallooed with open throats.
A human could not hear a headier music
than the rapturous roar which for Reynard’s soul
was raised.
The dogs, due their reward,
are patted, stroked and praised.
Then red fur rips—Reynard
out of his pelt is prized.

Then with night drawing near they headed homewards,
blaring their bugles with the fullness of their breath.
And at last the lord lands at his lovely home,
to find, by the heat of the fireside, his friend

the good Sir Gawain, in glad spirits
on account of the company he had kept with the ladies.
His blue robe flowed as far as the floor,
his soft-furred surcoat suited him well,
and the hood which echoed it hung from his shoulders.
Both hood and coat were edged in ermine.
He meets the master in the middle of the room,
greets him graciously, with Gawain saying:
"I shall first fulfil our formal agreement
which we fixed in words when the drink flowed freely."
He clasps him tight and kisses him three times
with as much emotion as a man could muster.
"By the Almighty," said the master, "you must have had luck
to profit such a prize—if the price was right."
"Oh fiddlesticks to the fee," said the other fellow.
"As long as I have given the goods which I gained."
"By Mary," said the master, "mine's a miserable match.
I've hunted for hours with nothing to my name
but this foul-stinking fox—fling its fur to the devil—
so poor in comparison with your priceless prizes,
these presents you impart, three kisses perfect
and true."
"Enough!" the knight entreats,
"I thank you through and through."
The standing lord then speaks
of how the fox fur flew!

And with meals and mirth and minstrelsy
they made as much amusement as any mortal could,
and among those merry men and laughing ladies
Gawain and his host got giddy together;
only lunatics and drunkards could have looked more delirious.
Every person present performed party pieces
till the hour arrived when revelers must rest,
and the company in that court heard the call of their beds.
And lastly, in the hall, humbly to his host,
our knight says good night and renews his gratitude.
"Your uncountable courtesies have kept me here
this Christmas—be honored by the High King's kindness.
If it suits, I submit myself as your servant.
But tomorrow morning I must make a move;
if you will, as you promised, please appoint some person
to guide me, God willing, towards the Green Chapel,
where my destiny will dawn on New Year's Day."

“On my honor,” he replied. “With hand on heart,
every promise I made shall be put into practice.”
He assigns him a servant to steer his course,
to lead him through the land without losing time,
to ride the fastest route between forest
and fell.
Gawain will warmly thank
his host in terms that tell;
towards the womenfolk
the knight then waves farewell.
It’s with a heavy heart that guests in the hall
are kissed and thanked for their care and kindness,
and they respond with speeches of the same sort,
commending him to our Savior with sorrowful sighs.
Then politely he leaves the lord and his household,
and to each person he passes he imparts his thanks
for taking such trouble in their service and assistance
and such attention to detail in attendance of duty.
And every guest is grieved at the prospect of his going,
as if honorable Gawain were one of their own.
By tapering torchlight he was taken to his room
and brought to his bed to be at his rest.
But if our knight sleeps soundly I couldn’t say,
for the matter in the morning might be muddying
his thoughts.
So let him lie and think,
in sight of what he sought.
In time I’ll tell if tricks
work out the way they ought.

FITT IV

Now night passes and New Year draws near,
drawing off darkness as our Deity decrees.
But wild-looking weather was about in the world:2000
clouds decanted their cold rain earthwards;
the nithering north needled man's very nature;
creatures were scattered by the stinging sleet.
Then a whip-cracking wind comes whistling between hills
driving snow into deepening drifts in the dales.
Alert and listening, Gawain lies in his bed;
his lids are lowered but he sleeps very little
as each crow of the cock brings his destiny closer.
Before day had dawned he was up and dressed
for the room was livened by the light of a lamp.2010
To suit him in his metal and to saddle his mount
he called for a servant, who came quickly,
bounded from his bedsheets bringing his garments.
He swathes Sir Gawain in glorious style,
first fastening clothes to fend off the frost,
then his armor, looked after all the while by the household:
the buffed and burnished stomach and breastplates,
and the rings of chain mail, raked free of rust,
all gleaming good as new, for which he is grateful
indeed.2020
With every polished piece
no man shone more, it seemed
from here to ancient Greece.
He sent then for his steed.

He clothes himself in the costliest costume:
his coat with the brightly emblazoned badge
mounted on velvet; magical minerals
inside and set about it; embroidered seams;
a lining finished with fabulous furs. . . .
And he did not leave off the lady's lace girdle;2030
for his own good, Gawain won't forget that gift.
Then with his sword sheathed at his shapely hips
he bound himself twice about with the belt,
touchingly wrapped it around his waist.
That green silk girdle truly suited Sir Gawain

and went well with the rich red weaves that he wore.
But our man bore the belt not merely for its beauty,
or the appeal of its pennants, polished though they were,
or the gleam of its edges which glimmered with gold,
but to save his skin when presenting himself,2040
without shield or sword, to the axe. To its swing
and thwack!
Now he is geared and gowned
he steps outside and thinks
those nobles of renown
are due his thorough thanks.

Then his great horse Gringolet was got up ready.
The steed had been stabled in comfort and safety
and snorted and stamped in readiness for the ride.
Gawain comes closer to examine his coat,2050
saying soberly to himself, swearing on his word:
"There are folk in this castle who keep courtesy to the forefront;
their master maintains them—happiness to them all.
And let his lordship's lady be loved all her life.
That they chose, out of charity, to cherish a guest,
showing kindness and care, then may heaven's King
who reigns overall reward them handsomely.
For as long as I live in the lands of this world
I shall practice every means in my power to repay him."
Then he steps in the stirrup and vaults tothe saddle2060
and his servant lifts his shield which he slings on his shoulder,
then he girds on Gringolet with his golden spurs
who clatters from the courtyard, not stalling to snort
or prance.
His man was mounted, too,
who lugged the spear and lance.
"Christ keep this castle true,"
he chanted. "Grant good chance."

The drawbridge was dropped, and the double-fronted gates
were unbarred and each half was heaved wide open.2070
As he clears the planking he crosses himself quickly,
and praises the porter, who kneels before the prince
and prays that God be good to Gawain.
Then he went on his way with the one whose task
was to point out the road to that perilous place
where the knight would receive the slaughterman's strike.
They scrambled up bankings where branches were bare,

clambered up cliff faces crazed by the cold.
The clouds which had climbed now cooled and dropped
so the moors and the mountains were muzzy with mist2080
and every hill wore a hat of mizzle on its head.
The streams on the slopes seemed to fume and foam,
whitening the wayside with spume and spray.
They wandered onwards through the wildest woods
till the sun, at that season, came skyward, showing
its hand.
On hilly heights they ride,
snow littering the land.
The servant at his side
then has them slow and stand.2090

"I have accompanied you across this countryside, my lord,
and now we are nearing the site you have named
and have steered and searched for with such singleness of mind.
But there's something I should like to share with you, sir,
because upon my life, you're a lord that I love,
so if you value your health you'll hear my advice:
the place you head for holds a hidden peril.
In that wilderness lives a wildman, the worst in the world,
he is brooding and brutal and loves bludgeoning humans.
He's more powerful than any person alive on this planet2100
and four times the figure of any fighting knight
in King Arthur's castle, Hector included.
And it's at the green chapel where this grizzliness goes on,
and to pass through that place unscathed is impossible,
for he deals out death blows by dint of his hands,
a man without measure who shows no mercy.
Be it chaplain or churl who rides by his church,
monk or priest, whatever man or person,
he loves murdering more than he loves his own life.
So I say, just as sure as you sit in your saddle,2110
to find him is fatal, Gawain—that's a fact.
Trust me, he could trample you twenty times over
or more.
He's lurked about too long
engaged in grief and gore.
His hits are swift and strong—
he'll fell you to the floor."

"So banish that bogeyman to the back of your mind,
and for God's sake travel an alternative track,

ride another road, and be rescued by Christ.2120
I'll head off home, and with hand on heart
I shall swear by God and all his good saints,
and on all earthly holiness, and other such oaths,
that your secret is safe, and not a soul will know
that you fled in fear from the fellow I described."
"Many thanks," said Gawain, in a terse tone of voice,
"and for having my interests at heart, be lucky.
I'm certain such a secret would be silent in your keep.
But as faithful as you are, if I failed to find him
and lost my mettle in the manner you mentioned,2130
I'd be christened a coward, and could not be excused.
So I'll trek to the chapel and take my chances,
have it out with that ogre, speak openly to him,
whether fairness or foulness follows, however fate
behaves.
He may be stout and stern
and standing armed with stave,
but those who strive to serve
our Lord, our Lord will save."

"By Mary," said the servant, "you seem to be saying2140
you're hell-bent on heaping harm on yourself
and losing your life, so I'll delay you no longer.
Set your helmet on your head and your lance in your hand
and ride a route through that rocky ravine
till you're brought to the bottom of that foreboding valley,
then look towards a glade a little to the left
and you'll see in the clearing the site itself,
and the hulking superhuman who inhabits the place.
Now God bless and good-bye, brave Sir Gawain;
for all the wealth in the world I wouldn't walk with you2150
or go further in this forest by a single footstep."
With a wrench on the reins he reeled around
and heel-kicked the horse as hard as he could,
and was gone from Gawain, galloping hard
for home.
"By Christ, I will not cry,"
announced the knight, "or groan,
but find good fortune by
the grace of God alone."

Then he presses ahead, picks up a path,2160
enters a steep-sided grove on his steed

then goes by and by to the bottom of a gorge
where he wonders and watches—it looks a wild place:
no sign of a settlement anywhere to be seen
but heady heights to both halves of the valley
and set with saber-toothed stones of such sharpness
no cloud in the sky could escape unscratched.
He stalls and halts, holds the horse still,
glances side to side to glimpse the green chapel
but sees no such thing, which he thinks is strange,
except at mid-distance what might be a mound,
a sort of bald knoll on the bank of a brook
where fell water surged with frenzied force,
bursting with bubbles as if it had boiled.
He heels the horse, heads for that mound,
grounds himself gracefully and tethers Gringolet,
looping the reins to the limb of a lime.
Then he strides forwards and circles the feature,
baffled as to what that bizarre hill could be:
it had a hole at one end and at either side,
and its walls, matted with weeds and moss,
enclosed a cavity, like a kind of old cave
or crevice in the crag—it was all too unclear to
declare.
"Green Church?" chunters the knight.
"More like the devil's lair
where, at the nub of night,
he makes his morning prayer."

"For certain," he says, "this is a soulless spot,
a ghostly cathedral overgrown with grass,
the kind of kirk where that camouflaged man
might deal in devilment and all things dark.
My five senses inform me that Satan himself
has tricked me in this tryst, intending to destroy me.
This is a haunted house—may it go to hell.
I never came across a church so cursed."
With head helmeted and lance in hand
he scrambled to the skylight of that strange abyss.
Then he heard on the hillside, from behind a hard rock
and beyond the brook, a blood-chilling noise.
What! It cannoned though the cliffs as if they might crack,
like the scream of a scythe being ground on a stone.
What! It whined and wailed, like a waterwheel.
What! It rasped and rang, raw on the ear.

“My God,” cried Gawain, “that grinding is a greeting.
My arrival is honored with the honing of an axe
up there.
Then let the Lord decide.
‘Oh well,’ won’t help me here.
I might well lose my life2210
but freak sounds hold no fear.”

Then Gawain called as loudly as his lungs would allow,
“Who has power in this place to honor his pact?
Because good Gawain now walks on this ground.
Whoever will meet him should emerge this moment
and he needs to be fast—it’s now or it’s never.”
“Abide,” came a voice from above the bank.
“You’ll cop for what’s coming to you quickly enough.”
Yet he went at his work, whetting the blade,
not showing until it was sharpened and stropped.2220
Then out of the crags he comes, through the cave mouth,
whirling into view with a wondrous weapon,
a Danish-style axe for doling out death,
with a brute of a blade curving back to the haft
filed on a stone, a four footer at least
by the look of the length of its shining lace.
And again he was green, like a year ago,
with green hair and flesh and a fully green face,
and firmly on green feet he came stomping forwards,
the handle of that axe like a staff in his hand.2230
At the edge of the water he will not wade
but vaults the stream with the shaft, and strides
with an ominous face onto earth covered over
with snow.
Our brave knight bowed, his head
hung low—but not too low!
“Young Sir,” the green man said,
“Your visit keeps your vow.”

The green knight spoke again, “God guard you, Gawain.
Welcome to my world after all your wandering.2240
You have timed your arrival like a true traveler
to begin this business which binds us together.
Last year, at this time, what was yielded became yours,
and with New Year come you are called to account.
We’re very much alone, beyond view in this valley,
no person to part us—we can do as we please.

Pull your helmet from your head and take what you're owed.
Show no more struggle than I showed myself
when you severed my spine with a single smite."
"No," said good Gawain, "by my life-giving God,
I won't gripe or begrudge the grimness to come,
so keep to one stroke and I'll stand stock-still,
won't whisper a word of unwillingness, or one
complaint."
He bowed to take the blade
and bared his neck and nape,
but, loath to look afraid,
he feigned a fearless state.

Suddenly the green knight summons up his strength,
hoists the axe high over Gawain's head,
lifts it aloft with every fiber of his life
and begins to bring home a bone-splitting blow.
Had he seen it through as thoroughly as threatened
the man beneath him would have met with his maker.
But glimpsing the axe at the edge of his eye
bringing death earthwards as it arced through the air,
and sensing its sharpness, Gawain shrank at the shoulders.
The swinging axman swerved from his stroke,
and reproached the young prince with piercing words:
"Call yourself good Sir Gawain?" he goaded,
"who faced down every foe in the field of battle
but now flinches with fear at the foretaste of harm.
Never have I known such a namby-pamby knight.
Did I budge or even blink when you aimed the axe,
or carp or quibble in King Arthur's castle,
or flap when my head went flying to my feet?
But entirely untouched, you are terror struck.
I'll be found the better fellow, since you were so feeble
and frail."
Gawain confessed, "I flinched
at first, but will not fail.
Though once my head's unhitched
it's off once and for all!"

"So be brisk with the blow, bring on the blade.
Deal me my destiny and do it out of hand,
and I'll stand the stroke without shiver or shudder
and be wasted by your weapon. You have my word."
"Take this then," said the other, throwing up the axe,

menacing the young man with the gaze of a maniac.
Then he launches his swing but leaves him unscathed,
withholds his arm before harm could be done.
And Gawain was motionless, never moved a muscle,
but stood stone-still, or as still as a tree stump
anchored in the earth by a hundred roots.
Then the warrior in green mocked Gawain again:
“Now you’ve plucked up your courage I’ll dispatch you properly.
May the honorable knighthood heaped on you by Arthur—
if it proves to be powerful—protect your pretty neck.”
That insulting slur drew a spirited response:
“Get hacking, then, head-banger, your threats are hollow.
Such huffing and fussing—you’ll frighten your own heart.”
“By God,” said the green man, “since you speak so grandly
there’ll be no more shilly-shallying, I shall shatter you
right now.”
He stands to strike, a sneer
from bottom lip to brow.
Who’d fault Gawain if fear
took hold. All hope is down.

Hoisted and aimed, the axe hurtled downwards,
the blade baring down on the knight’s bare neck,
a ferocious blow, but far from being fatal
it skewed to one side, just skimming the skin
and finely snicking the fat of the flesh
so that bright red blood shot from body to earth.
Seeing it shining on the snowy ground
Gawain leapt forward a spear’s length at least,
grabbed hold of his helmet and rammed it on his head,
brought his shield to his side with a shimmy of his shoulder,
then brandished his sword before blurting out brave words,
because never since birth, as his mother’s babe,
was he half as happy as here and now.
“Enough swiping, sir, you’ve swung your last swing.
I’ve borne one blow without backing out,
go for me again and you’ll get some by return,
with interest! Hit out, and be hit in an instant,
and hard.
One axe attack—that’s all.
Now keep the covenant
agreed in Arthur’s hall
and hold the axe in hand.”

The warrior steps away and leans on his weapon,
props the handle in the earth and slouches on the head
and studies how Gawain is standing his ground,
bold in his bearing, brave in his actions,
armed and ready. In his heart he admires him.
With volume but less violence in his voice, he replied
with reaching words which rippled and rang:
“Be a mite less feisty, fearless young fellow,
no insulting or heinous incident has happened
beyond the game we agreed on in the court of your king.
One strike was promised—consider it served!
From any lingering loyalties you are hereby released.
Had I mustered all my muscles into one mighty blow
my axe would have dealt you your death, without doubt.
But my first strike fooled you—a feint, no less—
not fracturing your flesh, which was only fair
in keeping with the contract we declared that first night,
for with truthful behavior you honored my trust
and gave up your gains as a good man should.
Then I missed you once more, and this for the morning
when you kissed my pretty wife then kindly kissed me.
So twice you were truthful, therefore twice I left
no scar.
The person who repays
will live to feel no fear.
The third time, though, you strayed,
and felt my blade therefore.”

“Because the belt you are bound with belongs to me;
it was woven by my wife so I know it very well.
And I know of your courtesies, and conduct, and kisses,
and the wooing of my wife—for it was all my work!
I sent her to test you—and in truth it turns out
you’re by the far the most faultless fellow on earth.
As a pearl is more prized than a pea which is white,
so, by God, is Gawain, amongst gallant knights.
But a little thing more—it was loyalty that you lacked:
not because you’re wicked, or a womanizer, or worse,
but you loved your own life; so I blame you less.”
Gawain stood speechless for what seemed like a century,
so shocked and ashamed that his stomach churned
and the fire of his blood brought flames to his face
and he wriggled and writhed at the other man’s words.
Then he tried to talk, and finding his tongue, said:

“A curse upon cowardice and covetousness.
They breed villainy and vice, and destroy all virtue.”
Then he grabbed the girdle and ungathered its knot
and flung it in fury at the man in front.
“My downfall and undoing; let the devil take it.
Dread of the death blow and cowardly doubts
meant I gave in to greed, and in doing so forgot
the fidelity and kindness which every knight knows.
As I feared, I am found to be flawed and false,
through treachery and untruth I have totally failed,” said
Gawain.
“Such terrible mistakes,
and I shall bear the blame.
But tell me what it takes
to clear my clouded name.”

The green lord laughed, and leniently replied:
“The harm which you caused me is wholly healed.
By confessing your failings you are free from fault
and have openly paid penance at the point of my axe.
I declare you purged, as polished and as pure
as the day you were born, without blemish or blame.
And this gold-hemmed girdle I present as a gift,
which is green like my gown. It’s yours, Sir Gawain,
a reminder of our meeting when you mix and mingle
with princes and kings. And this keepsake will be proof
to all chivalrous knights of your challenge in this chapel.
But follow me home. New Year’s far from finished—
we’ll resume our reveling with supper and song.
What’s more
my wife is waiting there
who flummoxed you before.
This time you’ll have in her
a friend and not a foe.”

“Thank you,” said the other, taking helmet from head,
holding it in hand as he offered his thanks.
“But I’ve loitered long enough. The Lord bless your life
and bestow on you such honor as you surely deserve.
And mind you commend me to your mannerly wife,
both to her and the other, those honorable ladies
who kidded me so cleverly with their cunning tricks.
But no wonder if a fool should fall for a female
and be wiped of his wits by womanly guile—

it's the way of the world. Adam fell for a woman
and Solomon for several, and as for Samson,
Delilah was his downfall, and afterwards David
was bamboozled by Bathsheba and bore the grief.
All wrecked and ruined by their wrongs; if only2420
we could love our ladies without believing their lies.
And those were fellows from fortunate families,
excellent beyond all others existing under heaven,"
he cried.
"Yet all were charmed and changed
by wily womankind.
I suffered just the same,
so clear me of my crime."

"But the girdle," he went on, "God bless you for this gift.
Not for all its ore will I own it with honor,2430
nor its silks and streamers, and not for the sake
of its wonderful workmanship or even its worth,
but as a sign of my sin—I'll see it as such
when I swagger in the saddle—a sad reminder
that the frailty of his flesh is man's biggest fault,
how the touch of filth taints his tender frame.
When my pulse races with passion and pride
one look at this love-lace will lessen my ardor.
But I will ask one thing, if it won't offend:
since I spent so long in your lordship's land2440
and was hosted in your house—let Him reward you
who upholds the heavens and sits upon high—
will you make known your name? And I'll ask nothing else."
"Then I'll treat you to the truth," the other told him,
"Here in my homelands they call me Bertilak de Hautdesert.
And in my manor lives the mighty Morgan le Fay,
so adept and adroit in the dark arts,
who learned magic from Merlin—the master of mystery—
for in earlier times she was intimately entwined
with that knowledgeable man, as all you knights know2450
back home.
Yes, 'Morgan the Goddess'—
I will announce her name.
There is no nobleness
she cannot take and tame."

"She guided me in this guise to your great hall
to put pride on trial, and to test with this trick

what distinction and trust the Round Table deserves.
She imagined this mischief would muddle your minds
and that grieving Guinevere would go to her grave
at the sight of a specter making ghostly speeches
with his head in his hands before the high table.
So that ancient woman who inhabits my home
is also your aunt—Arthur's half sister,
the daughter of the duchess of Tintagel; the duchess
who through Uther, was mother to Arthur, your king.
So I ask you again, come and greet your aunt
and make merry in my house; you're much loved there,
by me more than most, for as God be my maker
your word holds more worth than most anyone in this world."
But Gawain would not. No way would he go.
So they clasped and kissed and made kindly commendations
to the Prince of Paradise, and then parted in the cold,
that pair.
Our man, back on his mount
now hurtles home from there.
The green knight leaves his ground
to wander who-knows-where.

So he winds through the wilds of the world once more,
Gawain on Gringolet, by the grace of God,
under a roof sometimes and sometimes roughing it,
and in valleys and vales had adventures and victories
but time is too tight to tell how they went.
The nick to his neck was healed by now;
thereabouts he had bound the belt like a baldric—
slantwise, as a sash, from shoulder to side,
laced in a knot looped below his left arm,
a sign that his honor was stained by sin.
So safe and sound he sets foot in court,
and when clansmen had learned of their comrade's return
happiness cannoned through the echoing halls.
The king kissed his knight and so did the queen,
and Gawain was embraced by his band of brothers,
who made eager enquiries, and he answered them all
with the tale of his trial and tribulations,
and the challenge at the chapel, and the great green chap,
and the love of the lady, which led to the belt.
And he showed them the scar at the side of his neck,
confirming his breach of faith, like a badge
of blame.

He grimaced with disgrace,
he writhed in rage and pain.
Blood flowed towards his face
and showed his smarting shame.

"Regard," said Gawain, grabbing the girdle,
"through this I suffered a scar to my skin—
for my loss of faith I was physically defaced;
what a coveting coward I became it would seem.
I was tainted by untruth and this, its token,
I will drape across my chest till the day I die.
For man's crimes can be covered but never made clean;
once entwined with sin, man is twinned for all time."
The king gave comfort, then laughter filled the castle
and in friendly accord the company of the court
allowed that each lord belonging to their Order—
every knight in the brotherhood—should bear such a belt,
a bright green belt worn obliquely to the body,
crosswise, like a sash, for the sake of this man.
So that slanting green stripe was adopted as their sign,
and each knight who held it was honored forever,
as all meaningful writings on romance remind us:
an adventure which happened in the era of Arthur,
as the chronicles of this country have stated clearly.
Since fearless Brutus first set foot
on these shores, once the siege and assault at Troy
had ceased,
our coffers have been crammed
with stories such as these.
Now let our Lord, thorn-crowned,
bring us to perfect peace. AMEN.

HONY SOYT QUI MAL PENCE

ACKNOWLEDGMENTS

I can't pinpoint the moment when I decided to translate *Sir Gawain,* or remember how and why the idea came to me. A series of coincidences, probably. Like noticing my wife's dog-eared copy of the Tolkien and Gordon edition, the "green book," poking out of the bookshelf. Then leafing through it and my eye falling on a particular word—"wodwo"—a word well known to readers of Ted Hughes. Then the poem coming up in a conversation with the poet Glyn Maxwell in a taxi in Poland, who'd been reviewing a new version of *Gawain*. Then remembering that Hughes himself had translated several sections of the poem, and going back to read them, then remembering Tolkien's translation, which I'd read about twenty years ago, with its highly wrought sentences and ornate diction. Taken on their own, none of these incidents and recollections would have amounted to anything much, but when taken together they seemed like some kind of BIG HINT. Here was a narrative poem, one reliant upon craft and technique, written in a nonmetropolitan voice. Within about a week, the idea had gone from a fanciful notion to a superstitious (and preposterous) conviction that I was put on the planet for no other reason than to work on this poem.

This translation was first commissioned by Faber & Faber in the UK then shortly afterward by W. W. Norton in the United States. I am thankful to Seamus Heaney for his initial enthusiasm and support. From my position, Heaney's *Beowulf* and Ted Hughes's *Tales of Ovid* are like two monumental gateposts standing ahead of any poet wishing to travel in this particular direction. The writing was begun in mid 2003 and completed late in 2007. Even at proof stage, amendments and corrections were still being made, and the often-quoted notion that a poem can never be finished, only abandoned, has never felt more true. Even now, further permutations and possibilities keep suggesting themselves, as if the tweaking and fine-tuning could last a lifetime. I am grateful to my editor at Faber, Paul Keegan, for his many pages of remarks and for finally declaring the writing to be at an end, and to Charles Boyle for putting up with my faffing and fiddling. Large thanks are also due to Professor James Simpson at Harvard University for his overview of the Norton edition of this translation, and for raising an eyebrow at some of my wilder notions,

even from two and a half thousand miles away.

The Tolkien and Gordon edition of *Sir Gawain and the Green Knight,* revised by Norman Davies (Oxford 1967), with its plain-speaking commentary and extensive glossary, provided the foundation text for this project, along with the Everyman (1976) edition of A. C. Cawley and J. J. Anderson (used here in parallel), Malcolm Andrew and Ronald Waldron's edition published by University of Exeter Press, and the edition of J. A. Burrow (Penguin 1972). Notable and inspiring translations (with their indispensable notes and insights) include those of J. R. R. Tolkien (Allen & Unwin 1975; published in the United States by Houghton Mifflin), Brian Stone (Penguin 1959), Keith Harrison (Oxford 1983), W. R. J. Barron (University of Manchester 1974) and very recently that of fellow poet Bernard O'Donoghue (Penguin 2006). As a motivation to my own approach, I would especially mention the translation by Marie Borroff (Norton 1967), with its insistence on meter and rhyme where appropriate, and its dedication to upholding the alliterative drive of the original. *A Companion to the Gawain Poet* (ed. Derek Brewer, Cambridge 1997) is an important and useful critical anthology, as is J. A. Burrow and Thorlac Turville-Petre's *A Book of Middle English* (Blackwell 1992). Thank you to Peter Davidson at The University of Aberdeen for his cheery comments and useful connections, and to Peter Kidd at the British Library for arranging a long-anticipated viewing of the original manuscript. Prior to that, and in lieu of the real thing, the Early English Text Society's 1923 facsimile edition, introduced by I. Gollancz, was a more than adequate substitute.

ABOUT THE *GAWAIN* POET

The identity of the author of *Sir Gawain and the Green Knight* is not known. Only a single copy of the poem survives, bound in a manuscript with three other poems. Like the *Gawain* poem, they bear no specific title but have come to be known as *Pearl, Cleanness,* and *Patience*. Scholarship tells us that all four poems were probably composed by the same person. The manuscript also contains twelve simple but intriguing illustrations of which four relate to moments in the *Gawain* story. Many other immaculately preserved ancient texts appear hardly to have been opened, let alone read. But the *Gawain* manuscript has been well thumbed over the centuries, and seems to have been put to the task it was intended on many occasions.

The person who inscribed the poem was not its author. The *Gawain* poet, or the *Pearl* poet as he is sometimes called, was probably an educated man living and writing in the late part of the fourteenth century. His eclectic, almost eccentric vocabulary distinguishes him from other authors of the Middle English period. He was familiar with the stories of Arthurian Romance, and might also have been aware that some elements within his story, such as the beheading motif, could be traced back to early Irish literature. He would have been a contemporary of Chaucer, though we know from the language of the poem that he was not a Londoner but from somewhere further north. Dialect words in the poem suggest an imprecise area around Staffordshire, Cheshire, Derbyshire, or Lancashire. The geography of the poem, such as that of North Wales and the Wirral, along with other recognizable topographies are further evidence of the *Gawain* poet's "regional" background. In trying to establish his identity, one line of enquiry has been to look for numerological clues within the text (a common practice within medieval writings), for example by matching the total number of verses (101) to a name with an equivalent alphabetical value. Tantalizingly, perhaps teasingly, the words "Hugo de" appear near the beginning of *Sir Gawain*. Supposition about authorship has also been based on biographical readings of the poems themselves. Put crudely, the religious nature of *Cleanness* and *Patience* might imply he was a man of the church, and the beautiful and haunting poem *Pearl,* in which a man laments the death of his young daughter, could lead us to think that the author

was a bereaved father. On the other hand, he may just as well have been a childless layman with a big imagination and the required amount of religious faith. And it is informed guesswork rather than factual certainty that leads us to suppose that the author was male.

Intriguingly, within *Sir Gawain,* the poet refers to himself in the first person on a number of occasions, as in “I schal telle hit astit, as I in toun herde” (31). Of course, such familiarization between reader and writer is a commonplace literary device, yet it reminds us that somewhere behind the poem is a real person with a story to tell and a gift for telling it. Whether he will ever be named is doubtful, and I for one hope this remains the case, since in my own mind the mystery of his identity and the magic of his poem are quite properly and forever entwined.

ABOUT THE TRANSLATOR

Simon Armitage was born in 1963 in the village of Marsden in West Yorkshire. He is a graduate of Portsmouth Polytechnic and Manchester University, and until 1994 worked as Probation Officer in Greater Manchester. His first collection of poems, *Zoom!,* was published in 1989 by Bloodaxe Books, since when there have been a further nine collections, including *Selected Poems* (Faber & Faber 2001), and *Tyrannosaurus Rex Versus the Corduroy Kid* (Faber & Faber 2006). *The Shout—New and Selected Poems* was published in the United States by Harcourt in 2005 and was shortlisted for the National Book Critics Circle Award. He has received numerous awards for his poetry including a Gregory Award, the *Sunday Times* Young Author of the Year, a Forward Prize, and a Lannan Award. With Robert Crawford he edited *The Penguin Anthology of Poetry from Britain and Ireland Since 1945* and edited a selection of Ted Hughes's poetry for Faber & Faber in 2002. He is the author of four stage plays, including *Mister Heracles,* a version of the Euripides play *The Madness of Heracles.* His dramatization of Homer's *Odyssey,* commissioned by the BBC and published by Faber, received the Gold Award at the 2005 Spoken Word Awards. Simon Armitage has written for over a dozen television films. He received an Ivor Novello Award for his song lyrics in the Channel 4 film *Feltham Sings,* which also won a BAFTA, and wrote the libretto for the opera *The Assassin Tree,* composed by Stuart McRae, which premiered at the Edinburgh International Festival in 2006. His two novels are *Little Green Man* (Penguin 2001) and *The White Stuff* (Penguin 2004). His other prose work includes the best-selling memoir *All Points North* (Penguin 1998), which was the *Yorkshire Post* Book of the Year.

Simon Armitage has taught at the University of Leeds and at the University of Iowa's Writers' Workshop, and is currently a senior lecturer at Manchester Metropolitan University.

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125

PRAISE

More praise for Simon Armitage's

SIR GAWAIN AND THE GREEN KNIGHT

"The English poet Simon Armitage has provided a free and wonderfully offbeat version of this unusual masterpiece. . . . His *Sir Gawain*is fresh and startling, as though it had been written yesterday; it is rough-knuckled and yet it sings. . . . From start to finish, Mr. Armitage has clearly had great fun; each of his words has been tasted with gusto."

—Eric Ormsby, *New York Sun*

"Full of make-believe and festivity, this wonderful narrative poem possesses a Mozartean lightness and wit. Luckily, several modern versions, particularly those by W. S. Merwin and Simon Armitage, deftly replicate much of the feel and rhythm of the Middle English original."

—Michael Dirda, *Wall Street Journal*

"I enjoyed it greatly for its kick and music; its high spirits, its many memorable passages. I enjoyed it because, like the Gawain poet, Armitage is some storyteller."

—Kevin Crossley-Holland, *The Guardian*

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—Murrough O'Brien, *The Independent*

"Simon Armitage has translated this perfect read-aloud poem into

idiomatic English, convey[ing] the spirit and alliteration of the original."

—Fritz Lanham, *Houston Chronicle*

"This new translation by English poet Simon Armitage brims with brawny life, boasting such elements as a giant, other-worldly adversary, the code of chivalry and a comely and wanton maiden. If you liked 'Spamalot,' here's a chance to get even better acquainted with those Knights of the Round Table."

—*Boston Herald*

"[A] supple new translation. . . . Irresistible. . . . Armitage meticulously maintains the singsong alliteration . . . rarely, if ever, hitting a strained or duff note. . . . That Armitage, a celebrated Yorkshire-born poet, has injected a spot of northern dialect back into the poem, is delicious. Occasionally, he even improves on the original. . . . This is a translation to be savoured for its own linguistic merits: Armitage has pored over and polished every word. In the introduction, he writes that his ambition was to produce an independent, living piece of 'poetry.' He has certainly done that."

—Alistair Sooke, *Daily Telegraph*

"[Armitage] does get across the epic's emotional authenticity and subtlety and its tough, tricky, sardonic core. This translation reveals a writer closely attuned to centuries-old local influences and traditions of language."

—*Wall Street Journal*

"The story is rich, eerie and intoxicating as it follows Gawain from Camelot to his likely doom among the forests and crags and icy streams of the mysterious north. . . . Armitage never lacks for boldness. His enjoyment of the original's thickly consonantal four-stress alliterative line drives the narrative on at great pace. Nor does he neglect the poem's concern with pattern, colour and bejewelled decoration of castles, ladies' costumes and knightly equipment, seen flashing and glowing amid the inhospitable winter landscapes that dominate the poem . . . [Armitage] honours the original and will win it readers."

—Sean O'Brien, *Sunday Times*

"Joining translators such as JRR Tolkien and Ted Hughes, Simon Armitage has taken on one of the earliest stories in English literature. . . . [He] meets this poetic challenge courageously, staying faithful to

the story's structure and style but filling the Middle English rhythms with his trademark sound. . . . In the story of Gawain, Armitage has found a language capable of change. By insisting on that change, he had found a new poetry, a method of survival. Six hundred years away, Gawain is closer than he has ever been."

—*The Observer*

"The idiom Armitage develops is delicately responsive to the aural intricacies of the Middle English, but also has a free-flowing, colloquial twang that allows the poem to partake of the energies of contemporary speech. . . . Amitage's translation . . . captures much of this great poem's beguiling mixture of dreamy magic and bracing vigour."

—Mark Ford, *Financial Times*